

# OUT ON THE WIRE



*The Storytelling  
Secrets of the New  
Masters of Radio*

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*Jessica Abel*

Foreword by *Ira Glass*

OUT ON THE WIRE



ALSO BY JESSICA ABEL

*La Perdida*

*Mirror, Window*

*Soundtrack*

BY JESSICA ABEL AND MATT MADDEN

*Drawing Words & Writing Pictures*

*Mastering Comics*

# OUT ON THE WIRE

The Storytelling Secrets  
of the  
New Masters of Radio

**JESSICA ABEL**

Foreword by Ira Glass

**B\D\W\Y**

BROADWAY BOOKS

New York



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# Acknowledgments

The list of people I need to thank for helping me bring forth this book into the world is long, and probably incomplete. It starts, of course, with all the producers, reporters, editors, and staff I talked to from the various shows I love. I have done my best to mention them by name in the Show Guide (page 222). But let me just say again, my sincere and fervent thanks to all of them, and most particularly those who carved out large chunks of time to allow me into their whole creative process: the staffs of *Snap Judgment* and *Planet Money*, as well as Jay Allison, who invited me into his Woods Hole, Massachusetts, home and shared his family table with me. I also want to acknowledge the crucial help provided by Sean Cole, who read the manuscript and saved me from a few very embarrassing blunders.

On my personal “staff” is a long list of studio assistants who have pitched in on this project by logging and transcribing tape, preparing pages, working up backgrounds, drawing panel borders, and all the other boring but necessary prep labor that goes into making comics. Thank you: Kou Chen, Li-Or Zatzman, Justine Sarlat, Bastien Nerre, Ryan Brewer, and Dido Drachman. Also, my thanks to Mebina Tudlahar for transcription and logging. On my trip to Oakland, I was so pleased to have a chance to stay with my old friends Dee Hoover and Steve Beal. Reconnecting with them made it possible for me to concentrate on *Snap* on that visit.

I interviewed several people who, for reasons of length, don’t appear in the final book. Thanks to Daniel Alarcón of *Radio Ambulante*—the first show in Spanish (possibly the first in any language other than English?) to use this model of narrative journalism for radio. It’s fantastic. And also sometimes in English ([www.radioambulante.org/en](http://www.radioambulante.org/en)). I also spoke to the very talented Ari Daniel Shapiro, who

reports on science, and had lots of very cool things to say about how he makes science come alive ([www.aridanielshapiro.wordpress.com](http://www.aridanielshapiro.wordpress.com)). My thanks go also to Eben Mannes and Robb Jacobson for talking to me about their *Radiolab* remix experiences.

This book, quite literally, would not exist without Ira Glass and his sharp newspaper-clipping skills back in 1995. Thanks to Ira for coming up with the whole idea of radio comics, and getting me involved on the ground floor. Our work together has been an inspiration to me. Thanks also to Seth Lind, who has shepherded *Radio: An Illustrated Guide* for several years, and was instrumental in getting me started on this book.

For their help with *Radio: An Illustrated Guide*, my thanks go to the 1999-era staff of *This American Life*, and in particular Ira, Todd Bachmann, and Elizabeth Meister, for all their help and patience; as well as to Eric Nuzum for his generosity with his time and knowledge about computer editing; and to Brett Leveridge for help with photo reference.

I would probably still be thinking about what approach to take in these pages if it were not for my agent, Bob Mecoy. Thanks for making me do this.

My wonderful editor Meagan Stacey is the best one could hope for. Super-smart, cheerful, helpful, and ever willing to dive back in, again, to the dirty details; I feel incredibly lucky to have worked with her. Between Meagan and Domenica Alioto, I have always felt in safe hands. My thanks go also to Nancy Ethiel, who is my other best editor, as well as being my mother. She taught me well, and is still always there for me.

Matt Madden has redefined “helpmeet” in my personal dictionary. This is a man who can be the perfect partner, care for our kids, *and* edit the hell out of a weird comic book about radio, all at the same time. He even gets a chance to make his own comics, sometimes. Thanks and love to Matt for being a part of this book, and my life, at every stage.

Finally, thanks—for all you do—to the creative radio people who keep proliferating and creating ever more awesome audio. I am inspired by your work every day.

# Foreword

## by Ira Glass

I find myself lately living in a world I never imagined would exist. When I learned to make radio stories like the ones I make today, you could fit everyone who made these sorts of stories into a minivan. Now we're an army. Our ranks have been growing for a while but just in the last year, it feels like some new beachhead's been conquered and a flood of new podcasts has arrived, filled with stories that have surprising plotlines and humor and emotion and interesting, original ideas.

And these podcasts are finding audiences. One measure of just how much things have changed: When *This American Life* went on the air in 1995, it took us four years to get to a million listeners. In 2014, our spinoff *Serial* got there in four weeks. NPR's show *Invisibilia* got there even faster: over two million listeners per episode in four weeks. And as people continue to find these shows on the Internet, the numbers just keep climbing. At this point, each episode of *Invisibilia* has been downloaded by five million people. For *Serial*, the number's over seven million. Finally this year we seem to have left the era when telling someone about a podcast got you blank stares or a confused "HOW do you hear one of those things?"

If you picked up this book hoping to learn how to make stories like this yourself, let me be the first one to say Welcome! The water's warm! Jump on in!

If you picked up this book as a fan of these shows, to get a look behind the scenes, an enthusiastic Hello! to you as well. Please know that all of us in this comic book look cuter in these pages than we do in real life. I've read that being in the movies makes anyone look ten pounds heavier. Apparently comics lighten you by twelve or fifteen pounds. And in the comics, I and my colleagues agree, our skin has never looked better.

Jessica Abel has done a spectacular job capturing what our jobs are like. Frankly, I find it astonishing that an outsider could come into our radio offices and so thoroughly suss out the key things a person would need to know to make great work. So many parts of this book blow my mind, they're so well done. First and foremost: the chunk of this book that starts on page 47 about how to tell if a story idea is worth pursuing, and how to focus a story so it'll be great. People say so many smart things in that section that I'd never heard before, things I wanted to try out immediately. This book is a first-rate field manual for anyone thinking of joining our radio army.

If you're even vaguely considering this yourself, my advice is: start now. Don't wait for permission. Don't wait till you get a job doing this. Don't wait for inspiration to strike. Don't wait till you're at a better place in your life. Just start. You'll find it's simpler than you might think and as engrossing as you could ever hope for. And where to start? Well you should choose whatever feels right to you but the most basic radio piece you can make is an interview with someone who has some story to tell. For that kind of piece, you don't need to figure out how to write or perform your narration. You don't need narration! (All my early stories were non-narrated interviews for that very reason.) If you want to spend a little money, spring for a mic to plug into your smartphone and get a proper recording. Edit and mix the sound on GarageBand or whatever free software you like. You can strategize what to ask, do the interview, and structure the tape you get—go through all the steps of making that piece—in a week or two. Play it for a friend and have them critique and then make changes. Then play it for another friend and make more changes. Then try another story, and another. Rinse, repeat, get better, post to the Internet. Maybe pitch a story to some show you like.

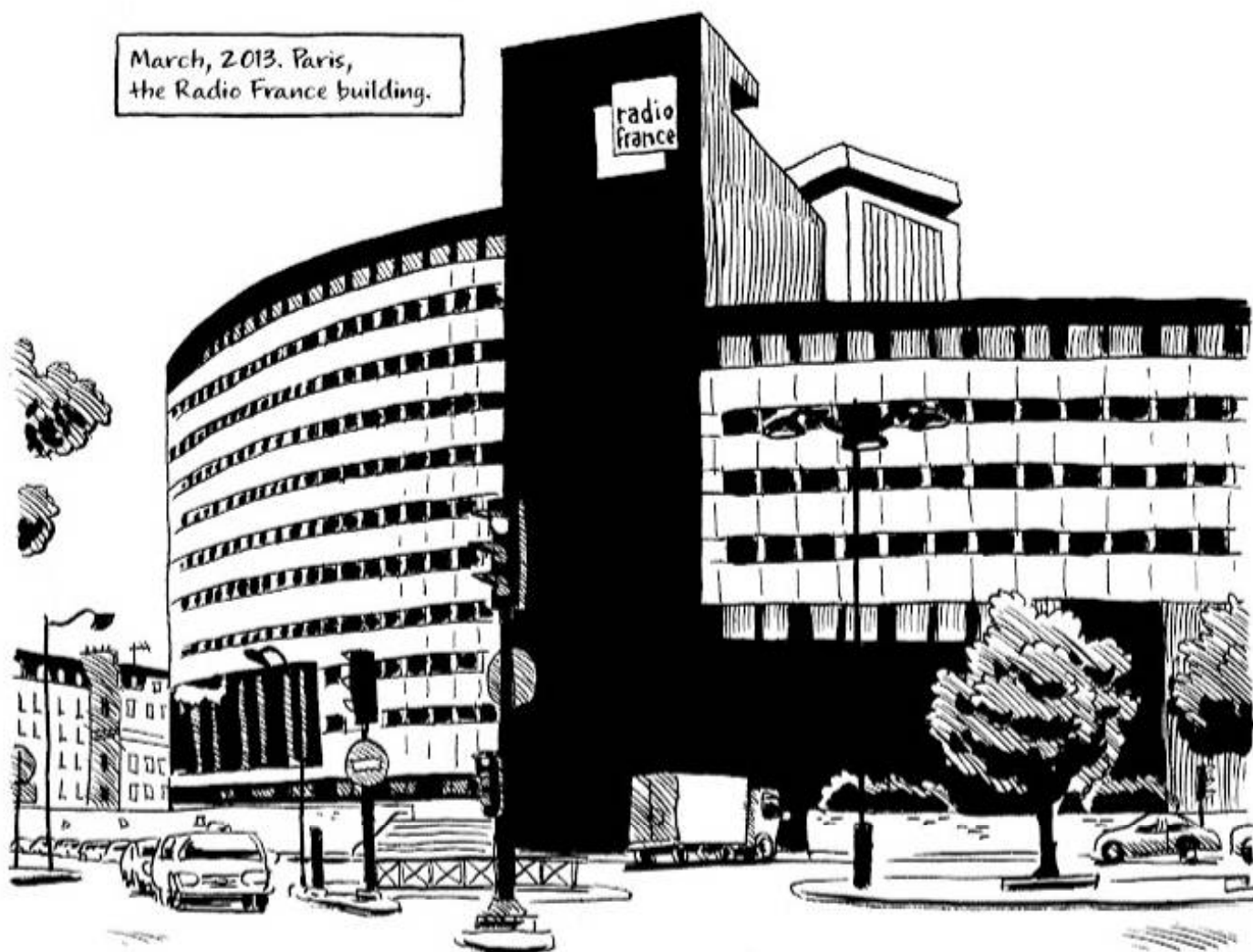
In 1998 when Jessica Abel first came to Chicago to hang out and draw that first short comic book about our show, my coworkers and I all thought we were far along into our radio journey together, old hands at our craft. After all, we'd been making *This American Life* for three years! What else was there to learn? At that point we'd already succeeded beyond our expectations and gone as far as we could



imagine anyone going, with our audience that was less than a million people and our barely existent internet presence. We had no idea other people would someday take up gear and join us on the battlefield making these sorts of stories. We didn't think of ourselves as the advance guard for the crowd that's now formed alongside us. But lately there's so much great audio being made, it's hard keeping up with it all. People are trying new things, expressing their personalities, documenting stuff nobody had gotten to till now. More than ever, it feels like there's so much to invent and discover. It feels like we're just at the beginning.

## Preface

March, 2013. Paris,  
the Radio France building.



Thomas Baumgartner, the host of *L'Atelier du son* on Radio France, found out about my comics about radio and was intrigued. He asked me in for an interview.



OK, je vais poser les  
questions en français.\*

Ça va.

I'd been living in France for nine months at this point. Long enough to understand questions in French, not long enough to answer them.

\*OK, I'm going to ask you the questions in French.

Jessica Abel, ce qu'il vous intéresse dans la radio, c'est quoi? *Is it hearing people's stories? Is it a question of sound, of voice? Is it a narrative question that you want to resolve?*



*\*...what is it that interests you about radio?*

Right, exactly, all of those things. In the last 15 years, radio in the U.S. has evolved entirely new ways of telling stories. There are so many shows now that produce stories that are...



...uh, compelling... and, um...

For over a year, I'd been working on this book and thinking about American radio almost nonstop. But it was still a struggle to define for this smart radio guy what, exactly, I was doing.



The kind of radio that entrances me as a listener, and that excites me as a thinker, it's unknown here.

How the hell could I explain what it is that makes the radio I love so important and worth our attention?



Since then, I've had a lot more time to think about it. So here's my answer.



Radio, especially public radio and the podcasts that have sprung from it, and especially (though not exclusively) in the USA, is the most fertile ground for narrative non-fiction in English-language media.

The producers working in this medium ("producers" in this context usually means people who report, narrate, edit, and soundtrack their audio stories) are making work that's *solid gold*.



Have you heard of "driveway moments"? Where you're listening to a story on the radio in your car and you arrive where you're going but you just sit in your car to hear the end of the story?



While you might get caught in a social media vortex and have a hard time pulling yourself away, it doesn't usually feel transcendent. But that's what it feels like when you experience the best audio stories.



And I tell stories. That's what I do for a living.

I'm betting you do, too. If not in the form of comics, then you're telling stories when you write up reports for your boss, or make a sales call, or even create a Facebook profile.



We are all storytellers.

So what do these radio producers know that I don't know?

Because, the question is, *How* do they make these stories solid gold?

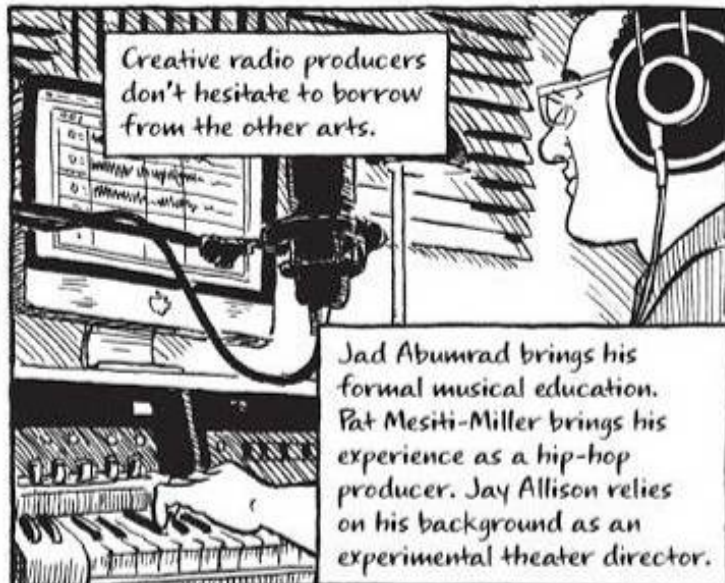




There's a spirit of, "let's just all get together and make this thing," of fearlessly breaking new artistic ground, that characterizes people working in this field.



Creative radio producers don't hesitate to borrow from the other arts.



Jad Abumrad brings his formal musical education. Pat Mesiti-Miller brings his experience as a hip-hop producer. Jay Allison relies on his background as an experimental theater director.

## PLANET MONEY MAKES A T-SHIRT

### From Cotton To Shirt, in 4 Gifts

After months of recording and thousands of miles of travel, our T-shirt project is live. Check it out: [planetmoney.com/tshirt](#)

Thanks to everyone who ordered a shirt and helped us along the way. Please design these four gifts as a small token of our gratitude.

1. The cotton for our shirts came from the Mississippi Delta.



2. It was spun into yarn in Indonesia in Indonesian men's shirts and Colombian women's shirts.

They're taking the best tools our culture has to offer and mixing it up in the service of audio stories.



3. The yarn was knitted into fabric, dyed and sewn in Bangladesh men's shirts and Colombian women's shirts.

They are often self-taught.



Being self-taught takes intense willpower and self-discipline to become the best. But it also takes imagination and self-knowledge.

KICKSTARTER

Public radio today is entrepreneurial and DIY. And I mean that in the punk rock sense, as well as in the business sense.



16,852 Backers  
\$490,346  
pledged of \$250,000 goal  
7 days to go

[View this project on Kickstarter](#)

This project will be funded if you help it to reach its goal.

Project by PRX, INC. (Pawling, NY)

It's a mission: to create the best public radio content possible. We're not just making radio. We're making a difference.

We are a collective of amazing storytelling radio shows. Let's remake public radio together.

Producers labor together in cooperative structures to build and rebuild their stories.



Everyone's stories go through edits, and even the lowliest interns have a voice.



They speak to us with recognizable voices, and sound like real human beings, allowing us to connect to their stories through the passion that we hear.



This feels so right to us today, when authority comes from directness and authenticity, not distance and formality.



But when I was sitting in the hallway of Radio France, I hadn't figured any of that out yet.



Several months earlier, I had been in Oakland, doing the research for this book with the radio show *Snap Judgment*.



My first day, the executive producer and host, Glynn Washington, took the whole staff—and (full disclosure) me—out to eat spicy Sichuan food.



This is good. This's got beef and...shrimp?

I'm kind of intentionally not asking what some of the meats are until after.

This is like lamb and spices?

They were curious about how I was planning to make this book come together.



Are you really going to cut all this tape?

"Cut this tape," meaning, am I going to transcribe and edit 80 or 100 hours of tape of interviews and meetings and Sichuan lunches? Yes.

Oooh. I don't know. Sort of? It's not exactly the same as you guys...



Do you quote exactly in your comics? Or do you paraphrase?



I quote fairly exactly, but as Justin Green said, the dirty secret of cartooning is copy fitting. You literally have limited physical space in which words can fit.



We should use smaller words.

Exactly. You *will* be using smaller words when it comes to the comic.



I'm excited. I've wanted to see the Ira comic for like, ever. Forever. I've heard about it for years.

You could have ordered it from the *This American Life* website. For like five dollars.



Seriously?



OK, yeah, so this is not the first time I've made a comic book about radio.

Back in 1998, I was living in Mexico City.



What time is it?

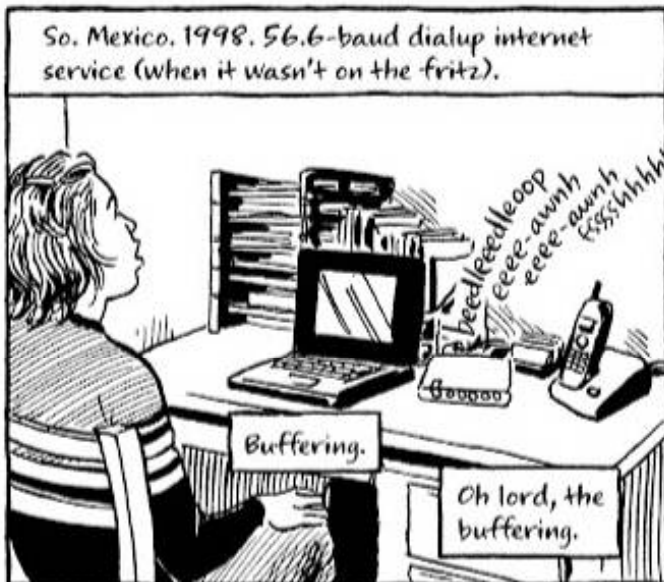
I'm a cartoonist. If you ever want to picture what it's like to be a cartoonist, you can start by imagining incredibly long hours hunched over a drawing table.

And for most cartoonists, it therefore involves listening to radio—hours and hours and hours of radio.



It's 1:15.

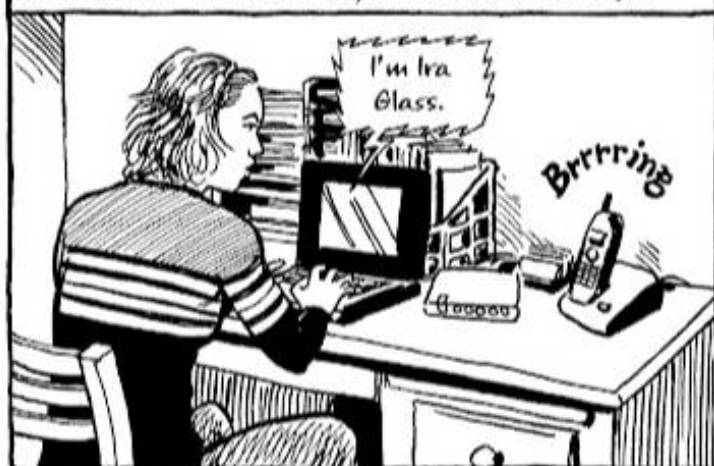
So, Mexico, 1998. 56.6-baud dialup internet service (when it wasn't on the fritz).



Buffering.

Oh lord, the buffering.

Of course, I could have just listened to music and not tested the primitive capabilities of RealAudio, but I was an addict of this new show, *This American Life*.



I'm Ira Glass.

Brrrrring

I'd been listening to it since it launched on local Chicago public radio WBEZ as *Your Radio Playhouse* back in 1996. Sure, I'd moved to Mexico, but I was not about to give that up.



Bueno?



So when my phone rang in the fall of 1998, and I answered, it took all of two words for me to realize that, incredibly, Ira Glass was on the line.



He thought of me because he'd clipped and saved a journalistic comic I'd done a few years earlier in a Chicago newspaper. So yes, making comics about radio was Ira Glass's idea. He's the one who's always saying, "Radio is a very visual medium."

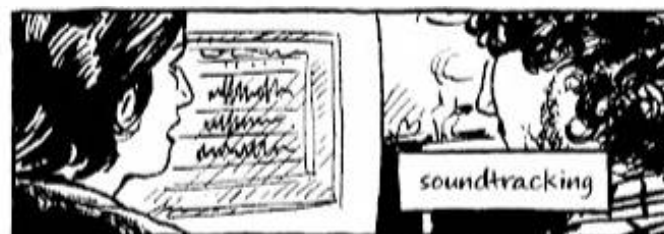
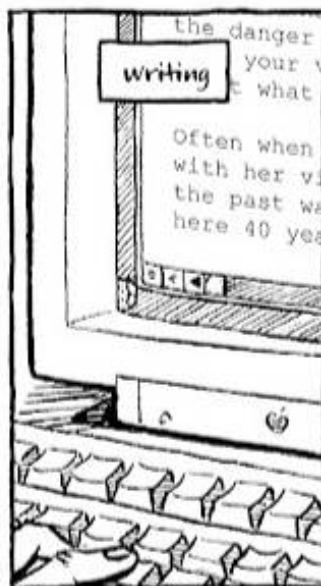


But journalistic comics weren't all that common at the time, so maybe he saw something kindred in me: someone willing to cross artistic boundaries.



(A panel from the story Ira saved.)

We called our comic *Radio: An Illustrated Guide*. It's designed to explain *This American Life's* work process (as of 1999), and to show behind-the-scenes tidbits.



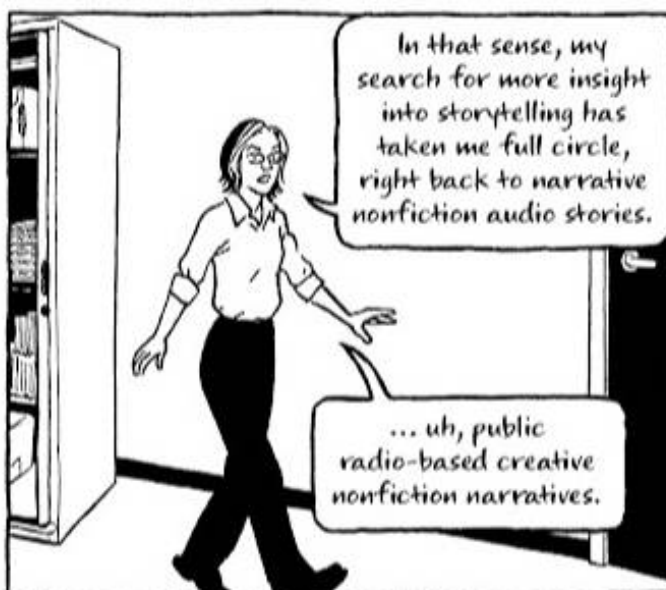
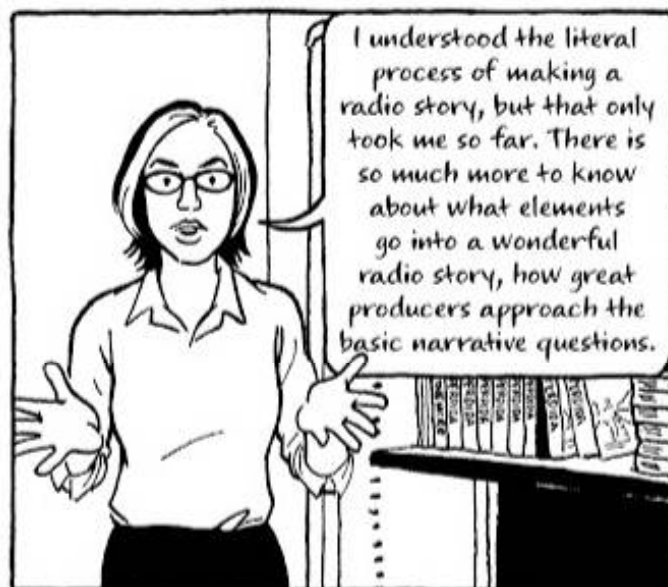
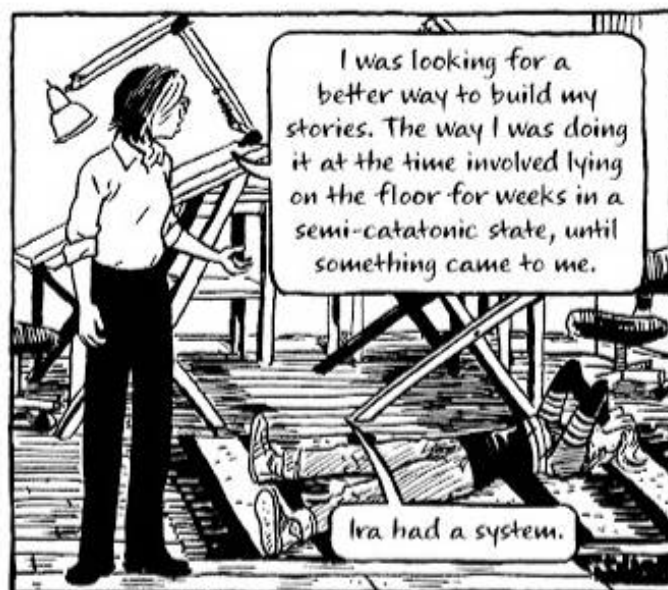
...is not only still basically unchanged at *This American Life*, it's also essentially the same process every radio show in this book uses.



There are variations, of course, but: get tape, cut tape, write narration (if any), get feedback, rewrite, recut, layer in sound, score with music, air.







Ira. Do you have a name for this kind of radio?



...

No.

No, no. That would really help, wouldn't it?

What is this kind of radio?

I mean, it's story. We're makin' stories.

ha ha

That's what we call 'em.

We're making *stories*. But like, you know, that's what the BBC calls the report coming in from Dubai on the market fluctuation.



Yeah. Everything is a story. That doesn't help much.

I mean, sometimes we'll say the word "narrative," but that's just like adding extra syllables—and boringness—to it.

It's narrative journalism, is what it is. I mean...we don't...

I think you might be stuck with "narrative journalism" if you want to call it something.

I just want to make something that is compelling to me.



And I wish there was a not-pretentious way to just say "compelling stories"...you know what I mean? Like...

It's like your original title for *Radios: An Illustrated Guide*, which was "How to Make Radio That's Actually Good."

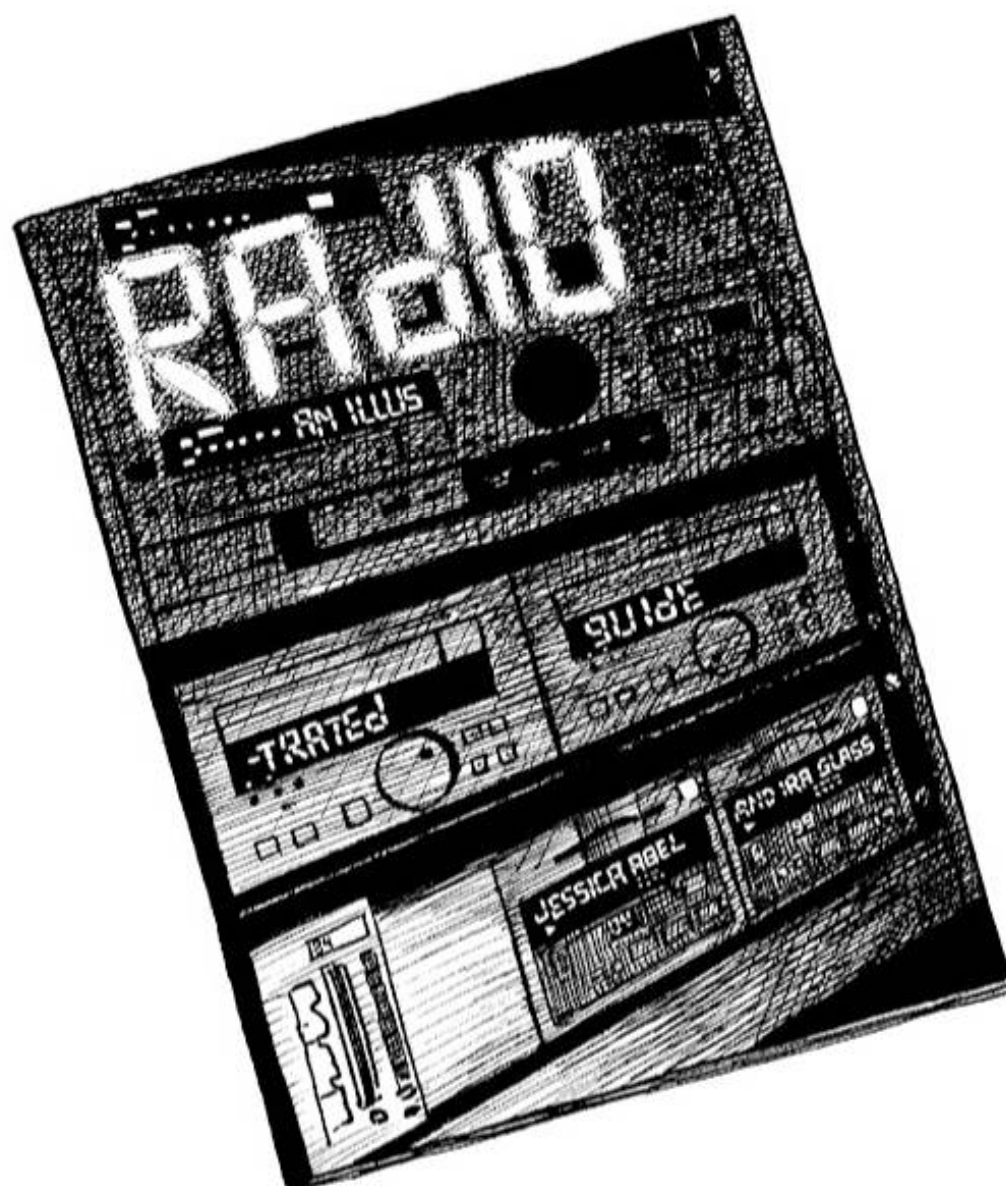


Yeah. I still sort of feel that way.

(excerpt from)

# Radio: An Illustrated Guide

by Jessica Abel and Ira Glass





The staff of *This American Life* invited me to spend a week with them in April 1999. It happened to be the week they were putting together a show called "Do-Gooders." Nancy Updike co-produced the "Do-Gooders" show with Ira.

By the way, you'll notice me (and sometimes Ira or other people) drawn in this clean black and white style at moments when I want to step outside the flow of events in the book to make a connection or highlight an insight.

You'll also see a difference between how we look now, in 1999, and in the rest of the book, where we're 15 years older!

A few basics: In 1999, we would typically work on an episode of our show for three or four months before it made it onto the air. For most of that time, we were just collecting stories. We would consider 15 or 20 story ideas, and start collecting interviews on six or seven of those stories, before we finally settled on the three or four that made it into the show. The first time the "Do-Gooders" show came up in a story meeting was January 4th, 1999. The show aired April 9th, 1999.

Our work week began with a story meeting on Monday morning and ended when we fed the show on the public radio satellite on Friday night at 7:00 Chicago time. That time was firm. Stations around the country taped the show off the satellite at 7:00, so, no matter what, when 7:00 Friday rolled around, we were on the air.

These days we assemble the show in a computer, but back then, the satellite feed was a live radio show. I read my intros live and played the stories off a fancy tape player. Mondays were sometimes pretty frightening: none of the stories were finished, and, in fact, we still hadn't totally decided which stories would even be on the show. Of course, the rest of the week was frightening too.



The producers as of April 1999.



NANCY UPDIKE



JULIE SNYDER



ALIX ('Elise') SPIEGEL



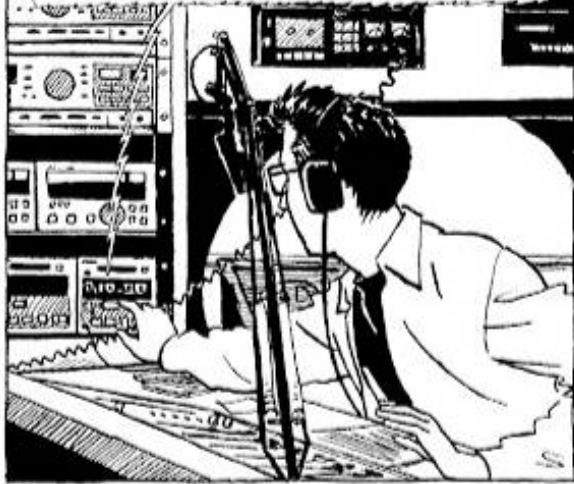
JORGE JUST  
(Production Intern)



6:29 Friday 4/9, 31 minutes to air.  
From WBEZ Chicago—and Public  
Radio International—it's *This  
American Life*. I'm Ira Glass.



Start from the top? I needed a driver. I  
couldn't drive, the problem was I wanted to,  
you know, have my same life, my same nice,



little, you know,  
suburban, get in the car  
and drive everywhere life.



Brigid was going blind—  
in mid-life, with a kid.  
She had stuff to do.

She had stuff to do.



Let's do that again. I was timing off, um,  
the counter, but it, you know what I mean,  
she ends two seconds before the end.

OK.

Hold on.

Alix Spiegel



Plenty of  
time.

I wasn't thinking  
about the time!

Nothin' but time, baby.  
We got time to boin!



# HOW TO MAKE **RADIO** THAT'S GOOD



## WHERE DO STORIES COME FROM?

I was going through the internship process with an applicant, Mary Wiltenberg. I had asked her to pitch some stories, and in the interview, she pitched a story about this part of southeastern Missouri...



Julie Snyder

...in the Bootheel, where, in 1939, there was a sharecroppers protest all along Highway 61.

It's sort of a fascinating story in that it was both black and white sharecroppers, and it ended with the federal government giving them more or less what they wanted, but I explained why we wouldn't be interested, that essentially this is sort of an A&E type of documentary...



...which is great, they're great stories, but we feel like it's already represented in public broadcasting, and it's just not what we do.

I also explained that the stories that we *do* do are really character-driven, that...

...they follow the same structure, a literary structure, as a fiction story might. The story needs one character, a character that you identify with, who interacts with...



...other characters in a very specific way, and there's conflict, change, and resolution (and not necessarily always the resolution part) inherent to the story...

...and the characters change and they grow and they learn something new, and surprising. Especially with our show, that's always what we're going for, something surprising, a surprising situation—where somebody comes to a conclusion that you wouldn't expect.



Mary Wiltenberg

is American Life  
BEZ Radio  
48 East Grand Avenue  
Chicago, IL 60611

20 January 19

Dear Ms. Snyder,

You mentioned, when we last spoke in November, stories involving some kind of change in a person; I thought of the Bootheel, where I'm working on a social work/documentary.

It involves an intrepid couple, and the death of their dream to save their tiny, rural town. The town--whose residents hate their lives, but fear change even more--is dying also, a victim of the same forces that are now killing much of rural America.

And then like three months later, she faxes me a letter saying that I've thought a lot about what you said and the kind of ways that you structure stories, and I've been looking around and thinking about it a lot, and I think I have a story here where I live that fits the structure you were talking about.

Kenny Whorton met in Canalou, Missouri forty-six years ago, when she was a child, and he was the boy next door who



The story was about Kenny and Jackie Whorton, who grew up in this small town, Canaleu [can-AL-u], Missouri, moved away, and then moved back after they retired. But the town had fallen apart in the 30 years they'd been away, and so they tried to improve things: organize activities for the kids in town, get streets and sewers fixed.



But it didn't work. The more they did, the more people hated them.

She basically wrote out the whole story, and in a really great way, too. That's the thing about pitch letters: they kind of have to be stories in and of themselves. She's a nice writer, and she wrote it in a really beautiful way.



But the best thing about it, for both Ira and me, was that we gave her feedback on her submission, and she actually understood the feedback, and found a different story based on what we said.



It was heartening for us, for me, because I wasn't sure if what I was saying was just like blah blah blah, only applicable if you were already in this world, or if they really were understandable ideas.

Around the same time, Elizabeth Meister, our webmaster, pitched us a story about another small town, in Kansas.



That town was also filled with people who didn't want their town to improve, and the heart of that piece would've been the same: to understand that point of view.

But what the Kansas idea lacked was some real story, some conflict, some event that brought everyone's attitudes into the open.



Sure, a reporter could go to Kansas and get people to blab about life there, but that's not as engaging to listen to as this saga of a couple moving back to town and becoming embroiled in this controversy.

A real story can be told as a sequence of actions.





FOR EXAMPLE...

This story ran on the show a few years ago.



So Brett was on the subway platform, afternoon rush hour, it's mobbed. And down the platform he sees this guy. The guy goes up to one person after another, stands very close, says something...



...and moves on. He's nicely dressed, doesn't seem to be asking for money. And he's getting closer, he approaches person after person, walks up to them, says something quietly, and moves on.



And as he gets closer, Brett can hear what he's saying.



Now at this point, no one's turning off the radio. But why? If you look at it, it's a completely banal story: a guy sees another guy on a subway platform. Where's the suspense in that?



The answer gets to the heart of what makes narrative work:

Whenever there's a sequence of events—this happened, then that happened, then this happened—we inevitably want to find out what happened next.

Also—and this is key—this banal sequence has raised a question, namely, What's the guy saying? And you'll probably stick around 'til you find out.

Back to our story.

...and what he's saying is: "You, you can stay." "You gotta go." "You can stay." "You're outta here." He draws closer.



And I'm starting to get a little nervous (ha ha)... Will I make the cut?

But Brett (ha ha ha), he's not choosing you for anything.

I know!

I know!

I know!

I know!

I know!

I know!

I know!

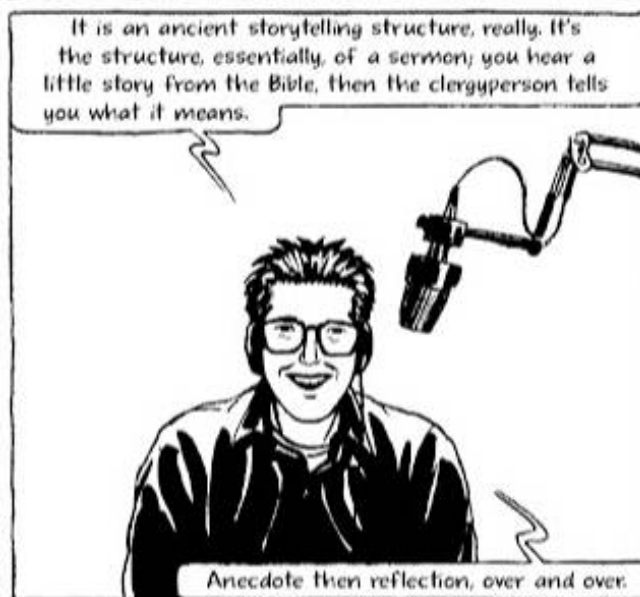
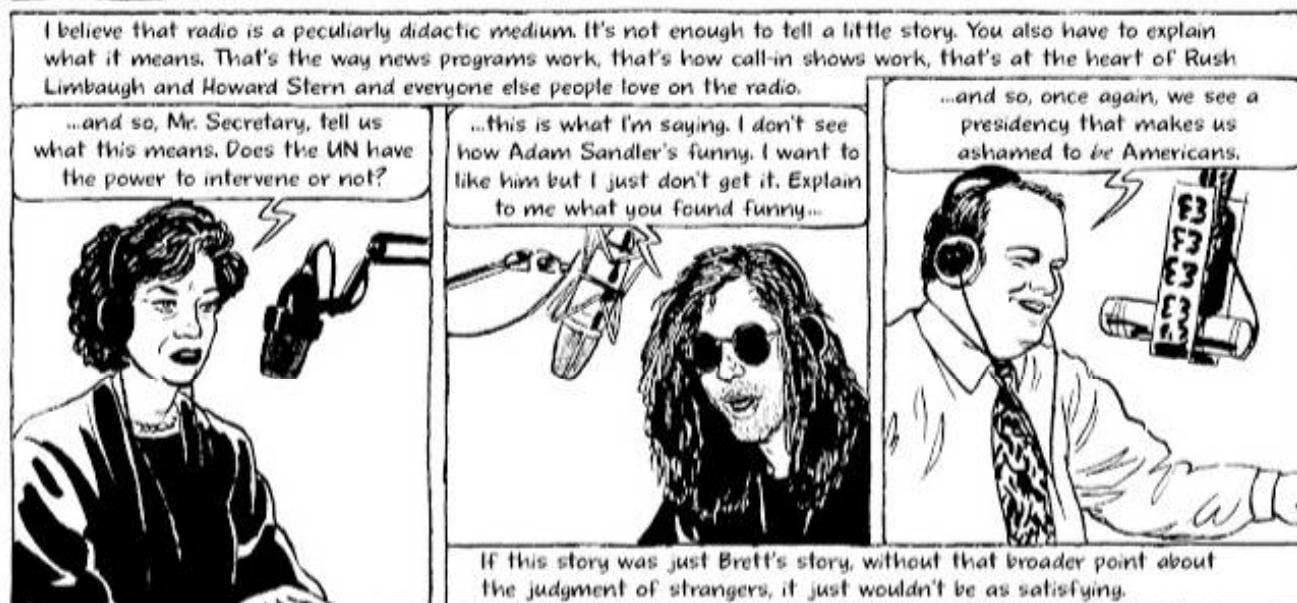
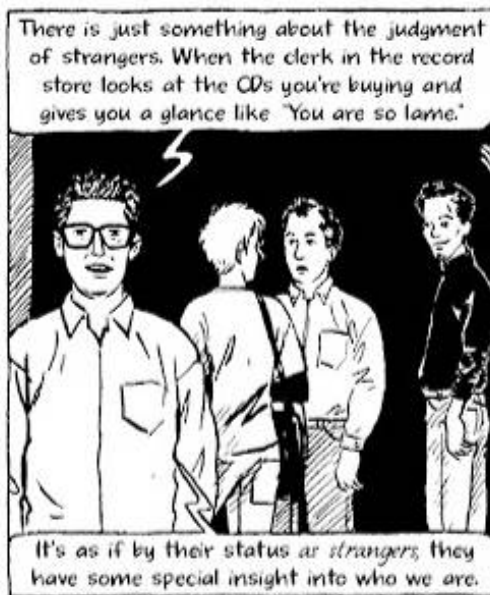
I know!

I know!

I know!

I know!





# THINGS COME TOGETHER, OR: GLOMMING ON







...and I thought, This brings up all sorts of interesting ideas about help, and doing good, and that it seems like it's going to be easy and simple, and it really rarely is.



And so then on Monday, I pitched it in the story meeting, and, you know, everybody thought it was a really good one, and we should just go ahead and move forward on it. I mean, the question was just essentially now how would we do it...

...who's going to go down to Missouri, is she going to report it, are we going to report it, what exactly are we going to do.

Ira's Office, March 17. Three weeks, two days to broadcast.



So I'm in the middle of this Philip Gourevitch book\*, and I just saw a story in the *Times* about humanitarian aid in the post-Cold War era, and it's stirring up ideas about what *is* the good we're doing, and where are we kidding ourselves.

And the Gourevitch book is a really beautiful example of that, about how international aid workers actually made things worse in Rwanda by aiding the side that committed genocide.



Do you feel his story's been told?



His book's gotten a lot of publicity. But I think it'd be cool to put a story on that scale with these other stories. Also, I think we'd be approaching it with a different sensibility than those other shows.

Okay, let's do it.

I heard Terry Gross do an interview.

Did she cover this?



No!

If it works, I think it would make the show...great.



...so we called Gourevitch up. And then, you know, Alix had seen this performance by Larry Steger, and thought, Oh, this could go in.





Story meeting. 10:42 Monday 4/5. Four days and ten hours to air.

OK, OK, this week for 'Do-Gooders,' here's what we've got: the blind woman, which I guess I should listen to finally, which is 7ish; Canadoul, which is 30; and then Philip Gourevitch, which does have two parts in it, one where he talks about the humanitarian aid being such a joke...



...and another part where he talks about the guy who's like Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*, who really is an effective do-gooder.

And then the other things that are contenders for the show are the Larry Steger story, and Spy Music, and the bag story... I mean, we don't have that much time...



Gourevitch I think realistically is like 16 to 18 minutes...

Wow, really? Then that's it...

...and worth it...



Then that's the whole show.

Once you get an idea going, things start to glom on to it; you know, you have a whole bunch of things, and the length that it's gonna be starts emerging, and some things drop out...



...and often, if they're good, they'll glom on to some other idea.

Yeah, I think we might want to try to make room for Larry Steger. It's only six minutes.



Is it funny?

Uh, no. It's not funny.

It's just a good entertaining story.

It's very dark.



This is going to be a really dark show.

Yeah. But whaddya expect? It's called 'Do-Gooders.' You thought maybe you were listening to a different radio show? ('Pimps,' however, is just gonna be a laugh riot.)



You know, one little light moment of someone handing someone else a sandwich, perhaps, I dunno.

# THE ART OF THE INTERVIEW

In February, Ira and Julie went to Canalou for three days with Mary Wiltenberg, who had pitched the story and knew the town, and taped 12 hours of material ('really not very much' according to Ira).



Ira, let's talk about interviewing technique. You're known as a great interviewer. How do you prepare for an interview?

A lot of figuring out the interview is making a structure for what it's gonna be. I'll go in with like two or three things I'm going for: I want the Whortons to tell me the story about what happened when they moved back to Canalou...



I want them to tell me why they think what happened happened, and there might be one other point.

Does that mean you don't really have specific questions?

Well, each thing might have like a million little sub-points, where I want details and details and details—little moments that I want them to be sure to cover.



But the main thing is, you want an overall plan that's simple, so you can be flexible, so you can respond to the things they say. Here're my notes for the interview.

Usually, *This American Life* interviews—like our stories—have two major sections: the narrative, and the reflections.

Big plot points I want them to talk about

(Kenny + Jackie Whorton)

How meet?

What was C. like?

Left + come back

Intention when returned

Possible details and details and details

rehabbed great-great-grandson for Alzheimer's, then I founded Cedar Ave - 4th of July party w/ beer & mixed + passed out

Do you tell your interviewees what the questions are ahead of time?

No! Well, kind of. You need to prepare them a little, tell them, like, This is going to take about an hour, and we're going to cut it down to just a few minutes on the radio...



...and I'm going to ask you about how you met so-and-so, or whatever. And you have to try not to act nervous. They'll follow your lead.

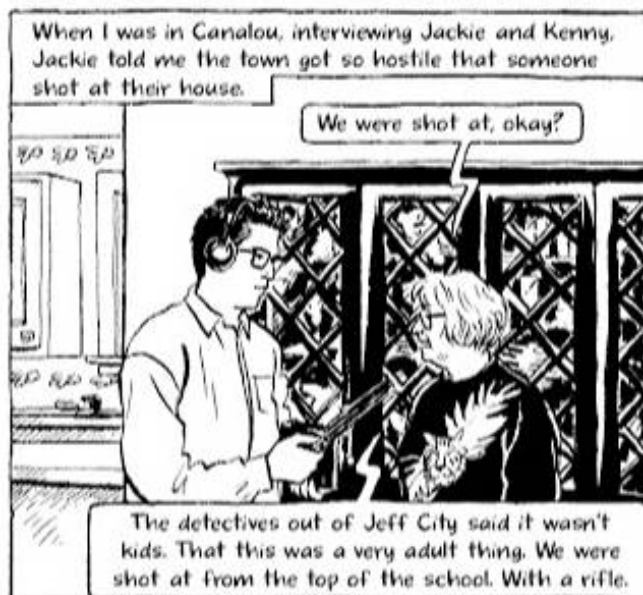
But how do—

And tell them not to be afraid to interrupt! That's really important.



Right, so—

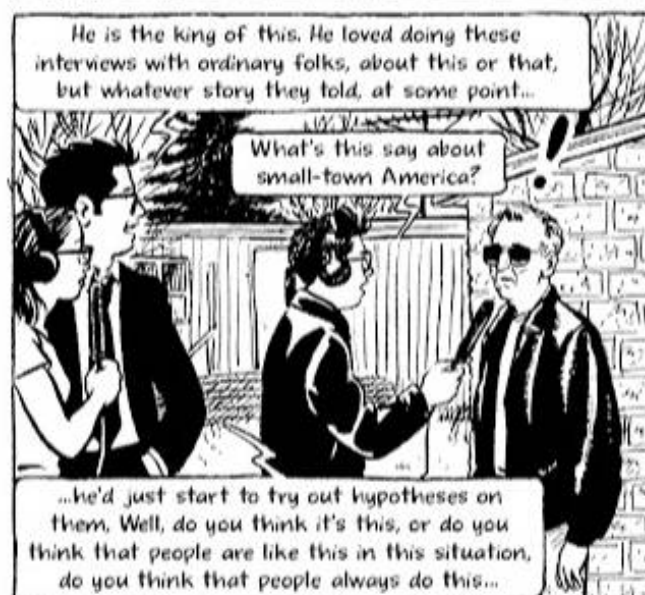
This great producer I worked with, Keith Talbot, used to say that doing an interview is like hosting a party.











Like, without that thing which says "In general, people, when they're in this situation, do this," it really, it just doesn't make sense in the context of radio. And some of these questions just go absolutely nowhere.

Has this changed your picture of what this country is?



Mine? No! Nothing to do with the country. This is *America*, man! If you don't like one place, you go somewhere else. Like the Bible says, "You dust your heels off and go on."

But eventually something will stick.

You ever hear this phrase, "No good deed goes unpunished"?



Ha ha ha... "No good deed goes unpunished"? Well, probably not. But maybe we haven't done such a good deed for these people here. Not what they wanted, that's for sure. Maybe it's more what we wanted than what they wanted.

Like I said, radio is a peculiarly didactic medium, unlike, for example, theater, or comics, where something can kind of happen, and you're in a setting where people will infer the meaning.



The way we're used to listening to radio is: something happens, and then they say, "Here's why we're talking about this. Here's what it means."

So you do this because we're used to it this way?



Also because it's more satisfying. If you tell the story without the moment of reflection at the end, it loses grandeur. Moving to the general statement takes you out of the province of bar story and into the world of literature...which is, you know, where you want to be... at this end of the radio dial!

What do you think it means that radio has to spell out for listeners the significance of the stories it tells, but, in other art forms, that sort of thing comes across as heavy-handed?



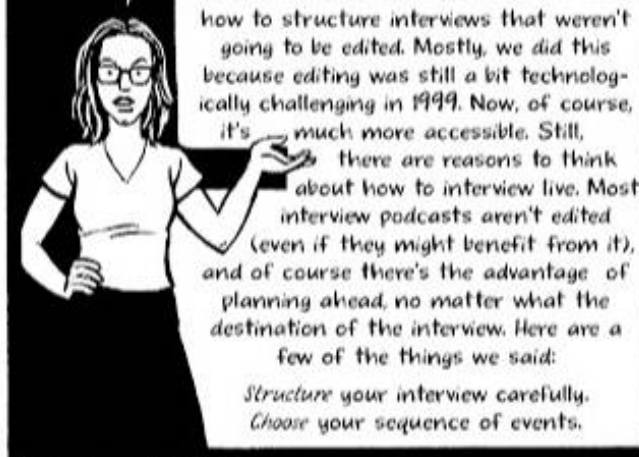
It's just another example of how much more fun it is to make radio than to work in any other medium.

Just for that, I'm drawing you without hair for the next page. Then we'll see what's fun.

## INTERVIEWING LIVE

In the original *Radio: An Illustrated Guide*, we took a moment here to talk about how to structure interviews that weren't going to be edited. Mostly, we did this because editing was still a bit technologically challenging in 1999. Now, of course, it's much more accessible. Still, there are reasons to think about how to interview live. Most interview podcasts aren't edited (even if they might benefit from it), and of course there's the advantage of planning ahead, no matter what the destination of the interview. Here are a few of the things we said:

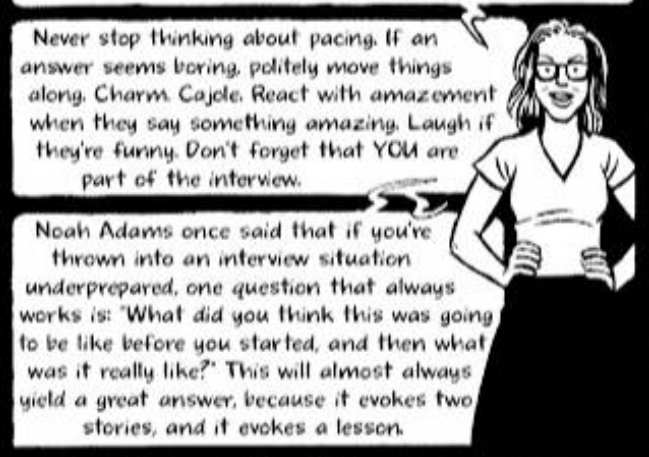
Structure your interview carefully.  
Choose your sequence of events.



Think about when you are going to have the person tell stories, and when you are going to, as Ira puts it, "deploy them against them", i.e., when you are going to quote things they have previously said or written back to them.

Never stop thinking about pacing. If an answer seems boring, politely move things along. Charm. Cajoled. React with amazement when they say something amazing. Laugh if they're funny. Don't forget that YOU are part of the interview.

Noah Adams once said that if you're thrown into an interview situation underprepared, one question that always works is: "What did you think this was going to be like before you started, and then what was it really like?" This will almost always yield a great answer, because it evokes two stories, and it evokes a lesson.





## WRITING: GETTING YOUR STORY STRAIGHT

So you're done with the interviews, you go home, and then you do *what* with 12 hours of...stuff?

First, you have to get control of the tape. It's really easy to get overwhelmed, to lose sight of the story.

You have to whittle 12 hours down to 15 or 20 minutes, so the first step is to LOG the tape.

What's a log?

A log is like a transcript, but less exact. You don't need every word. You can type or handwrite. The key is: you want to take notes on what's in the tape *without ever stopping it*.

It's impossible to overstate how important it is to take good notes if you're making radio. After all, you're working in a medium which is just sound floating through the air. It's ether. Vapor. You need a representation—on paper—so you can see what the hell you've got and make hard choices.

Have a word or phrase for each sentence. You'll need this later, when you're editing, choosing which sentences to keep. The log will be a map of what's there.

have problems like big towns have these days.

SO 1950S GREW UP HERE?

yes for both of us.

DESCRIBE HOW TOWN WAS BACK THEN?

\*\*\*\*\*kenny: the town was really a booming town, on sat had to get here early to get place to park. had six grocery four or five restaurants and come to town to visit, no tv back then.

VISIT EACH OTHER?

visit each other. play checkers, old men play checkers, old would be visiting and kids would be playing until two or three in the morning.

jackie: and they'd put us little ones in the back of the cars sleep b/c we couldn't stay with them. they played rough.

Logging an interview in real-time is one of the tests you have to pass to become a tape cutter on *Fresh Air*. It's one of the first things we teach our interns.

Logs are long. 119 pages for the Canolou story. So next you go through and circle your favorite three or four moments from each interview. Then you take out a clean piece of paper, and make a list of all those favorite moments.

For Canolou, it was about 20. Suddenly—like magic—12 hours of tape is reduced to a one-page list.

Sure, if you have really small handwriting.

Then you just stare at your list, until it seems clear which piece of tape (or which script idea) should be the first moment in the story, and which should be the last. This is the Zen part.

When Kenny + Jackie were kids  
- town tape  
- intvw

So decided to ~~move back~~ -  
But a lot had changed

Brad + Susan + lot (dead power)  
don't move houses - he made words

Don't think of himself as do-gooder  
- everyone calling, tell  
- summarize And from that, you build an outline.

Then you start writing. You choose and edit your final quotes at the same time as you write the script. Here are some things Ira thinks about when writing for radio.

by the surrounding

And when Kenny Whorton and his wife Jackie talk about what it was like in Canalou when they were kids, a dream, a town in an old black and

tape -- :10 This was the place the last four seconds of this]

tape -- :16 The old men ... giv

He will notice how he tells the story when he tells his friends. He notices the things he says, and the order he says them. This paragraph is in the story because whenever Julie told anyone about Canalou, one of the first things she found herself talking about was this kid.

When I pulled into Canalou, a 4-yr old who lives next door to the Whortons was playing in a drainage ditch. These ditches line both sides of every street in town, because there's no sewage system here. Most people live in trailers, not regular houses. And some people empty their septic tanks straight into these ditches, where kids play. The day I arrived it had rained and the ground was soft and muddy everywhere. An adult who'd let this four-year old touch her a few weeks back had gotten a rash on her face that even the doctors up in St Louis couldn't identify or cure.

This is the town Kenny and Jackie couldn't wait to get back to ...

He will write the way he talks. If there's any phrase in your script that he wouldn't actually say to a person in a real conversation at dinner, he will rewrite. These dot-dot-dot sentence constructions are normal in radio scripts, but would never cut it in a newspaper.

... to come back and build a home here.

a supervisor at McDonnell Douglas - the in the suburbs ... raised two kids ... associations and the board of ed ... And

back some of the spirit they remembered growing up here in the 50's & 60's ... maybe start a little league ... park with swings and trees ... put up a gym where ball ... the kinds of straightforward, innocent hard to imagine anyone opposing anywhere ...

In a narrative, you have to keep raising a series of broader questions, woven into the storytelling.

This is the story of why they failed ... of why people did turn their backs on the Whortons ... why three years of using every skill they had - devoting energy and hope - only proved to them that Canalou did not want to be improved ... and that something had changed in this small town that would take a lot more than two do-gooders to reverse.

Hopefully people hear this and want to know what happened. Moments like this create suspense. Suspense, after all, is simply an unanswered question.

The key is to keep moving between different kinds of moments: funny scenes, emotional scenes, raising questions. After several minutes of people talking about how terrible Canalou is...



So we put in a scene where we heard people goofing around at home: a kid does his Forrest Gump and Sling Blade imitations; a woman talks wistfully about how great it'll be to grow old in Canalou.





Once you have a first draft, you run the whole thing by someone else. You read them the script and play the quotes. They critique. On our show, I edit the producers' stories, and they edit mine.

That transition to the last scene makes no sense. The tape's pretty but I have no idea why I'm hearing it.

I know, I know.

You know what the point of this scene is? In order to do good of any kind, you have to have a vision of the way you want things...There's a ruthlessness to changing anything...

Hold it—let me type this into the script...

...to imposing your will on what the world is...And the danger of having a vision is that your vision can cloud your eyes about what is...

Will on what the world is...the danger of having a vision that your vision can cloud about what is...

Often when I talked to Jack with her vision of Cana... the past was to her ... Pe... here 40 years saw the town

## TAPING AN INTERVIEW

Radio reporters need to follow certain rules to record broadcast-quality tape.



1) A decent microphone, a digital recorder, and a set of headphones are essential. But you have lots of options. You can make a broadcast-quality recording on your iPhone. The key is having a decent microphone. Built-in mics won't cut it. (And yes, they make good cheap mics to use with an iPhone.) Up-to-date, specific recommendations can be found on Transom.org.

3) Get in close. The single biggest factor in making a good recording is proper mic placement. You can make cheap equipment sound good if you do this right. Hold the mic 3-4 inches *below* the interviewee's mouth, just below the chin. Yes, you'll feel weird getting this close to a stranger's face. *But you must.* Be brave! Now Ira will demonstrate the cartooning skills that inspired him to hire Jessica for this job:

Ira © 1999



Keep the mic below the mouth: if it's 4" away, but directly in front of the mouth, the air coming out of the interviewee's mouth will make annoying "p-pops."

2) Location location location. You need quiet. No noisy fans, no music or TV playing in the background, no street noise, nothing that'll make it hard to edit later. Avoid echoey rooms. A carpeted living room is ideal. And wear headphones so you can be sure the recording's OK.

NO

Shall we do our interview in this restaurant?

YES

Shall we do our interview in my hotel room?



Why is it so important to get close? Make a recording with the mic 4", 8", and 12" from your mouth. Listen. When the mic's closer, your recordings sound richer, with more frequencies present, with less of the hum of the room.



4) More mic placement. When you ask a question, point the mic back at yourself. Otherwise, the question won't be loud enough on tape. At the end of the interview, record a half minute of room sound, without anyone talking; you'll need this for editing.



## EDITING: THE INVISIBLE ART

If you're trying to make something that sounds like the interviews or documentary stories on *This American Life*, you have to edit the sound. It's not as hard as you might think. In fact, editing is one of the great pleasures of working in radio. It's easy to go into a kind of trance.



Young Ira cutting tape at NPR.

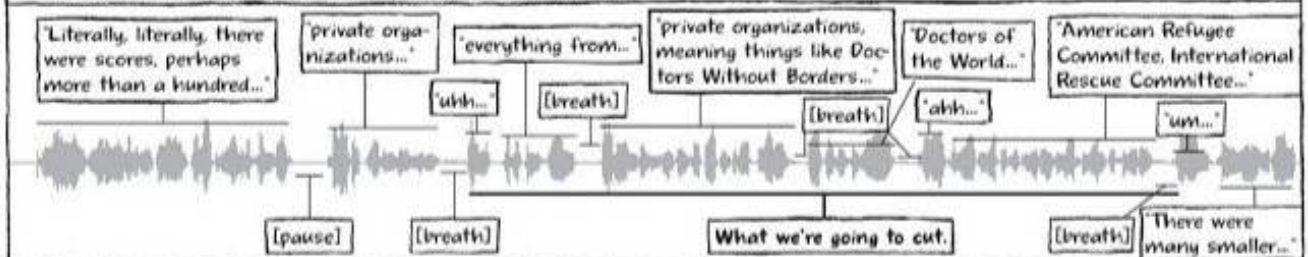
You can edit sound on reel-to-reel tape, using a razor blade to literally cut sentences out of your story.

And there's lots of good software that lets you edit on your laptop or desktop. Some is cheap or free. Some comes with your computer, like GarageBand on Macs.

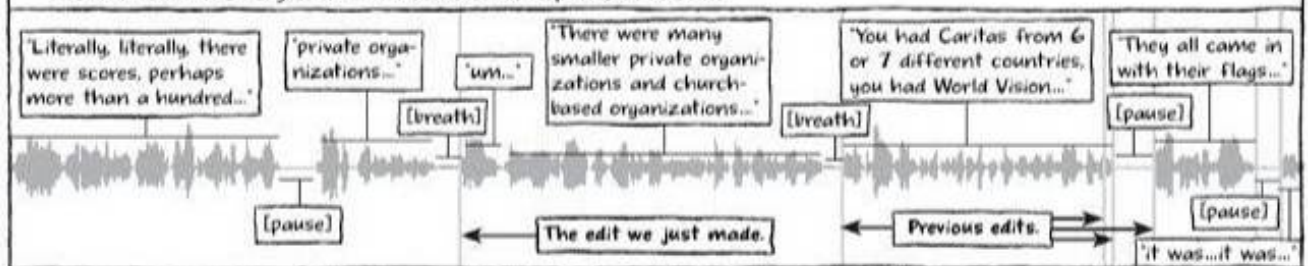


But whichever system you use, when you're editing people talking, there are certain basic rules. First, you have to preserve the rhythm of normal speech. When we speak, we normally say a sentence, and then we breathe, and then we say another sentence. Then we breathe again.

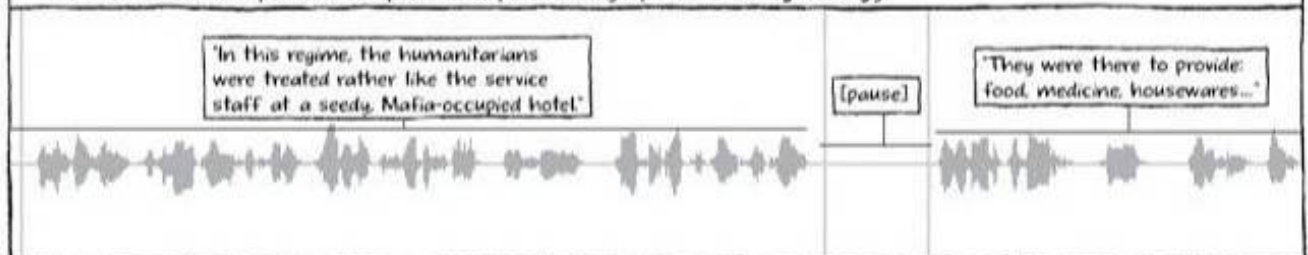
This is a section of Philip Gourevitch's interview, loaded into the editing software used at *This American Life*. On the computer, sounds and words are graphically represented as waveforms, and edits are also visible, as vertical lines. Pauses are flat sections of line, and breaths are small waveforms. Notice where the breaths fall: often at the ends of sentences, but sometimes in the middle.



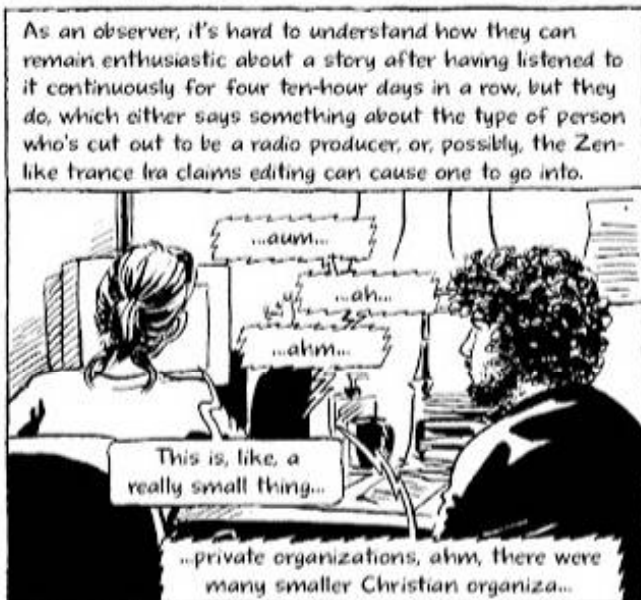
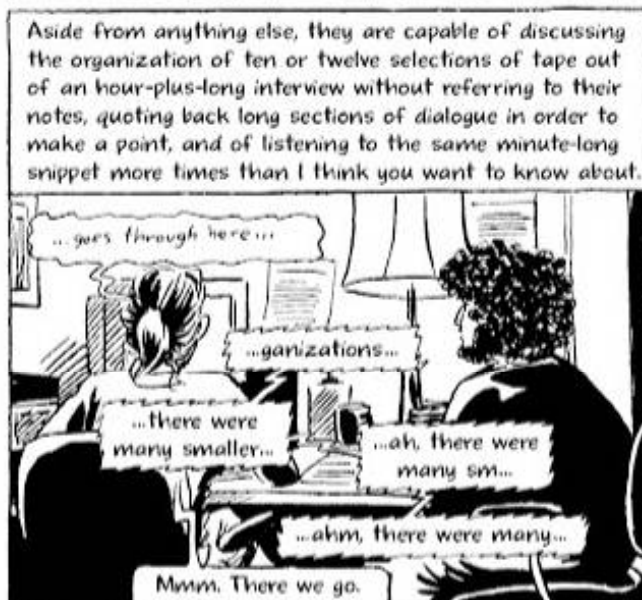
If you remove a phrase or a sentence, you have to keep the rhythm natural. Usually that means keeping a breath after each sentence, at the edit points. Sometimes you have to try different breaths, to see which one sounds more natural. Your edit points are almost always at the very beginning of a word (after a pause or breath) or at the very end of a word (before a pause or breath).



Second, there's a difference between a pause and a breath. Sometimes an interviewee will finish an important point, take a quick breath, but then rush on to the next idea. If you insert a pause—just the sound of the room—before the breath—or replace the breath with a pause, then their big idea will register more clearly with the listener. Here we inserted a pause to emphasize a particularly apt and chilling analogy.



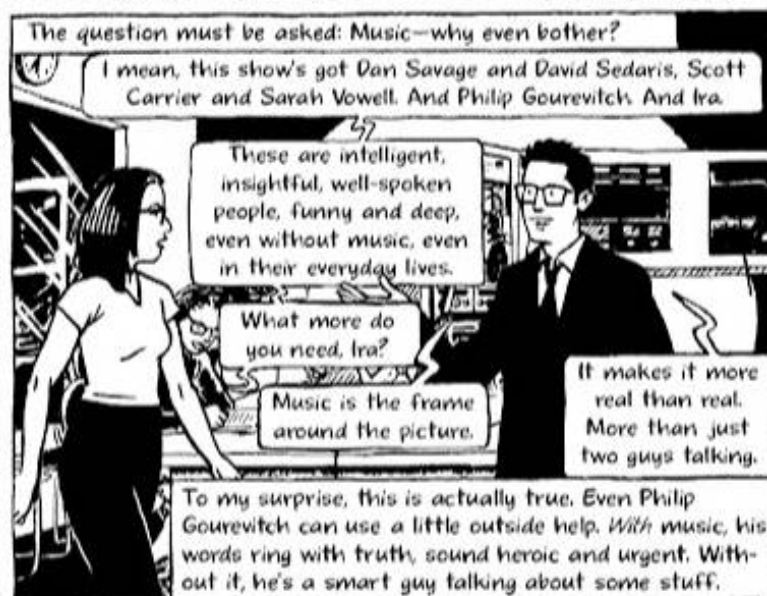
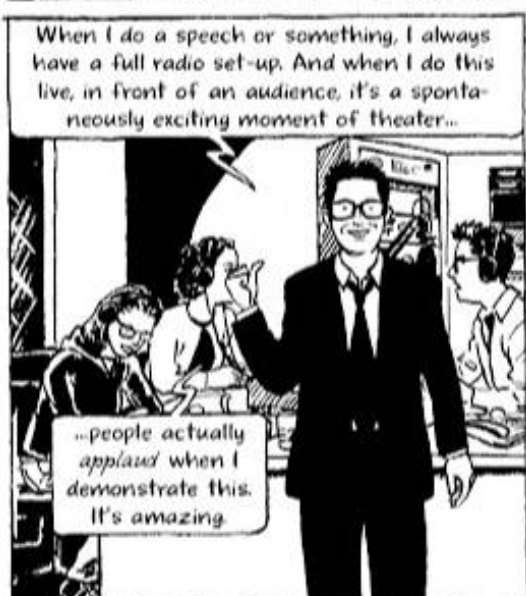
Philip Gourevitch is one of the best interviewees possible. He has surprising and moving stories to tell, and many urgent and thoughtful things to say about those anecdotes. It took Nancy and Jorge two full days to choose among the many stories and ideas, and to shorten anecdotes here and there.





# PUTTING MUSIC TO WORDS

6:32 Friday 4/9. 28 minutes to air.





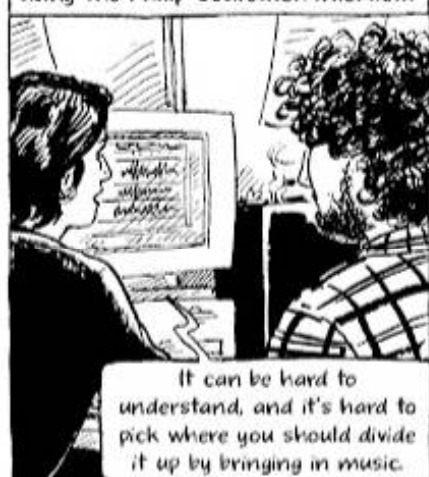
With music, his points are divided into sections, his most important statements highlighted. When he finishes presenting an idea, the music plays for six or seven seconds, and you can just ponder. It gives you time to understand him better.



...had been previously: Kill all the Tutsi, join in the killing. Now it was: Flee. Join in the exodus. And really close to a million and a half or two million people fled Rwanda in the largest and fastest mass exodus...



2:35 Wednesday 4/7. Two days, four hours, and 25 minutes to air: Alix is teaching Jorge how to score a piece, using the Philip Gourevitch interview.



Sometimes there're obvious music cues, like, somebody will introduce a new character, or they'll talk about some event, or some feeling, and you bring in music which speaks to that in some way.



...and you always take out the music when there's a big idea that you really want people to pay attention to. You lose the music so it stands out.



It's like shining a light on it.



# FROM THE TOP, TAKE 2



The top of the show—that five-minute-or-so introduction Ira does each week—is recorded ahead of time, but sometimes not *much* ahead of time.

I grew up on a daily news show. That's normal to me. That's what I'm used to. There's no slack in the system.

It was common to get a feed that needed editing and mixing 20 minutes before it went on the air.

For a while we tried to not do *This American Life* live; we went on the air locally on Friday and then put it up on the satellite a week later. But then we didn't take the initial broadcast seriously. It was like an art project—um, not that there's anything *wrong* with an art project...

Doing it so close to the edge—for better or worse—makes it feel like a real radio show.

Now it's like, when we broadcast the show, at that exact moment—

—our voices are going into **SPACE!!**

You know when a deadline isn't real, and when it is.

On the other hand, we normally try to record the top of the show by 5:00 on Friday. It's a lot easier to read the script if there's less pressure.

For 'Do-Gooders,' Ira and Alix finished recording the top at about 20 minutes to air, and Alix finished the edit at about four minutes to air (and had missed one stumble in Ira's reading, which would be fixed before the re-broadcast on Saturday, but still caused her to lose sleep on Friday night).

The top is the biggest section of the show that's mixed live—meaning that all the music is brought in and cut out, and all the quotes—"actualities" in radio-speak—are played by hitting buttons and sliders on the console, not by orchestrating everything on a computer screen.

Ironically, the story that became the top of the 'Do-Gooders' show, finished at four minutes to seven on Friday 4/9, was the story that got the whole idea for the show rolling in the first place, back in January: the Blind Woman.



# FROM THE TOP, TAKE 3

Finally, on Friday at 6:58 exactly, the public radio satellite is put at the disposal of *This American Life*.



At that moment, the studio is often full of visitors, watching, hoping they don't have an irresistible urge to cough at the wrong moment, excited to see how the whole thing works. And here is how it works:

Thirty-three minutes later, Jackie and Kenny's story ends. Ira plays the song that he and Sarah have just chosen. Next, he reads the script that goes into the 10 break, pauses a second, plays 59 seconds of 10-break music for local announcements, pauses for a second, and reads the next intro (to the Gourevitch story, in this case) live.



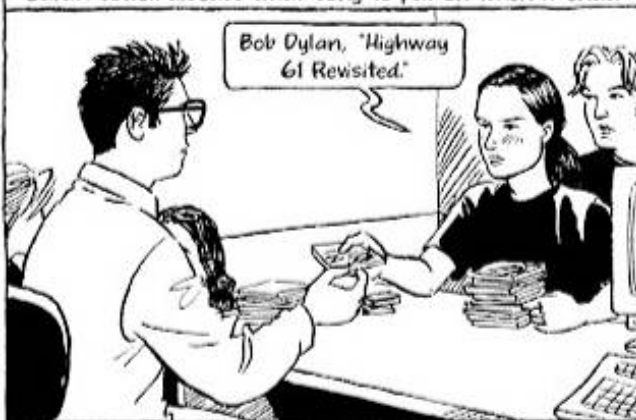
Coming up, do-gooders with a million dollars a day in their pockets and plane tickets overseas. That's in a minute, from Public Radio International, when our program continues.

The key to the whole thing isn't structure. In fact, the simpler the structure, the more space you have to follow your curiosity, to work in the moments and quotes that give you pleasure, or evoke some feeling in you, or amuse you.



Wait, so, we just spent 30 pages giving away all the secrets to the show and now you tell me that you're *still* basically on your own and have to follow your own instincts to make radio?!

First, Ira plays a tone for a minute and 50 seconds. This lets stations that are recording set the proper level on their tape machines. At 7:00 exactly, he plays the DAT of the show's opening (the "top"), then the DAT of the first story—about Kenny and Jackie. As the story plays, he and Sarah Vowell discuss what song to put on when it ends.



You know, when you spell out how the show is made, it sounds almost formulaic—an anecdote, some bigger idea, another anecdote, a few seconds of music—but on the air, it doesn't feel like a formula.



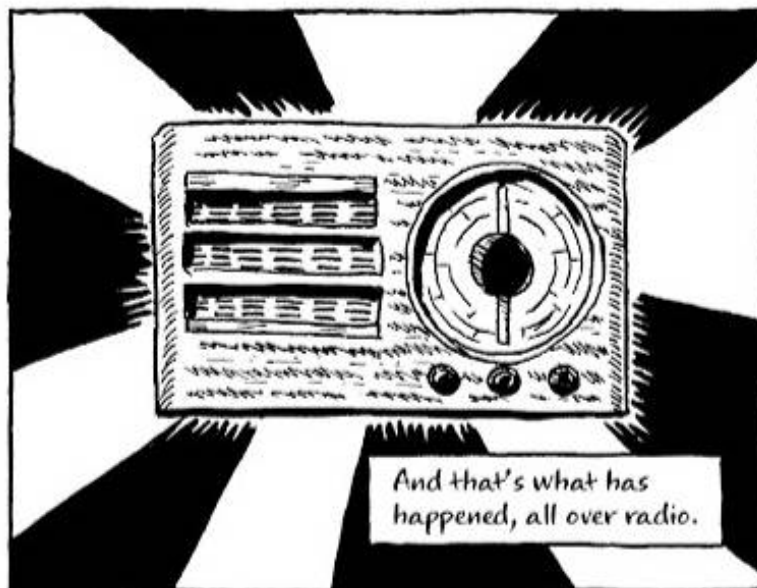
Well, that structure—and all the rules here—they're just the bare frame of a stage on which the people and ideas of a show can take place. We stretch and break these rules all the time. But they give us a framework to think about what we're doing.

Well, yeah! A group of people with different personalities than ours could take the same ideas about structure and writing and editing, and make a show that's way sassier than ours, or way more emotional, or way more reverent.



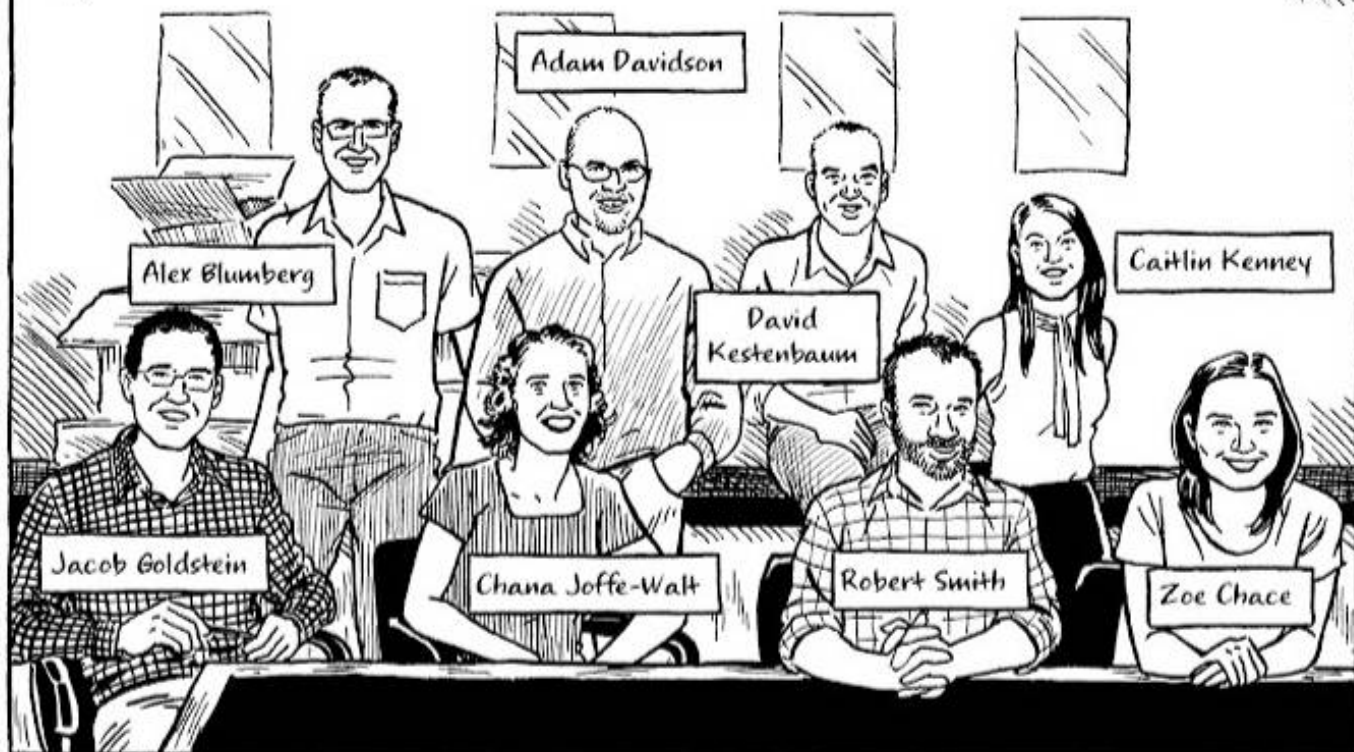
The key is to express your own personality. Radio is boring when the people on the air just want to sound like everyone else. The people who are the most fun to listen to—from Paul Harvey to Terry Gross—they sound only like themselves. Everyone should try it.

## BACK IN THE PRESENT DAY



The people pictured in the following pages are those that I've interviewed or mentioned by name in this book. They are not by any means all who are involved in producing these shows. They're also not all still at the same shows since I interviewed them. Please see Notes, page 211 for details.

*Planet Money* reveals the workings of the economy to those of us not equipped with graduate degrees in the dismal science. They manage somehow to make the inner workings of the most complex transactions not only clear, but fascinating.

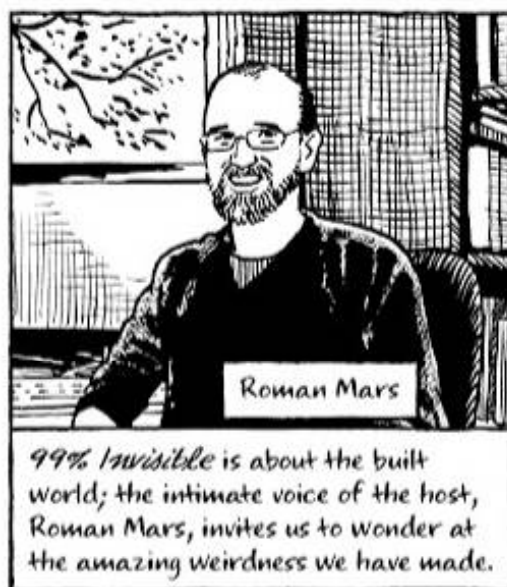


*Radiolab* is a show about ideas, often scientific ideas, which means they need to find ways to make very abstract concepts concrete and understandable. They do this by underlaying rock-solid story structure with incredible flights of sonic fancy.





The Moth also focuses on true first-person stories, but unlike *Snap*, the stories are all told live, and they work to preserve the immediate and risky thrill of that live performance.







In many cases, intricate uses of sound as part of storytelling.



And the people making these stories get there in a characteristic way: through intense collaboration where everyone gives and receives honest feedback.



These shows have something universal to say about narrative.

You can use these ideas to tell stories effectively, in comics, in film, in journalism...

These things work.



When people craft stories with these elements, the voices we hear are powerful. When they say, "Listen, let me tell you a story..." you can't help but listen.



So listen. Let me tell you a story.



AMUSE YOURSELF:

# Ideas





It comes from the fact that when these producers and reporters go out looking for stories, they find them by paying careful attention to what's *interesting* to them.



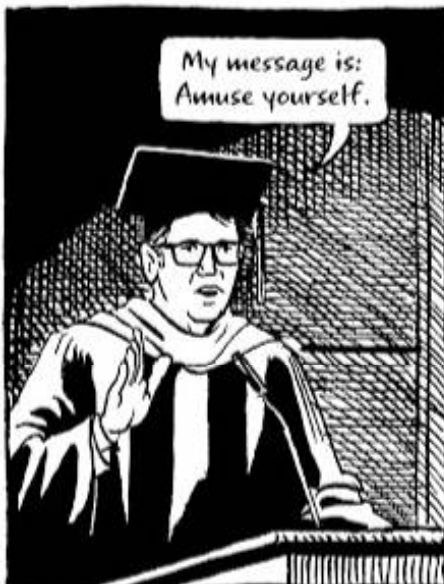
They've learned to *notice* what's exciting to them, what they tell their friends about, what they have questions about. It's a real skill, it takes practice.



And by following what's interesting, by building their understanding of whatever that is and digging deeper, they arrive at the most surprising and engaging stories you've ever heard—and, crucially, that *they've* ever heard, either.



My message is:  
Amuse yourself.



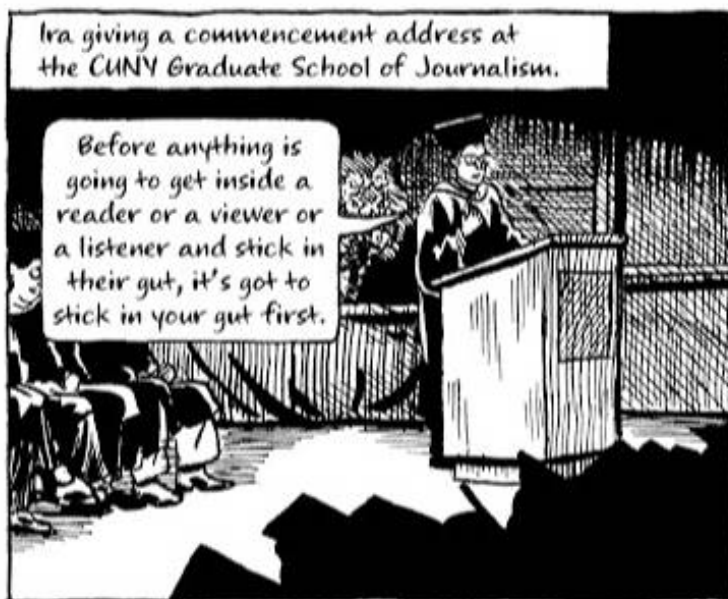
Ira talks about having "good taste" and "knowing your taste," and I think this is what he means by that.



Story ideas are not sprinkled on us like fairy dust. Finding a story idea is a job within itself.

Ira giving a commencement address at the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism.

Before anything is going to get inside a reader or a viewer or a listener and stick in their gut, it's got to stick in your gut first.



On our show, the best stories come from someone just following some itch.





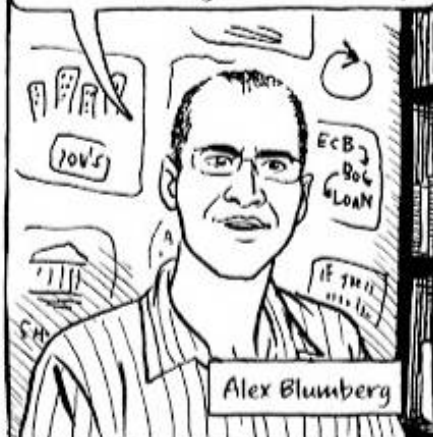
The most popular, commented-on, awarded piece of journalism we ever did was an episode called "The Giant Pool of Money."



This producer, Alex Blumberg, before the housing market collapsed, he just got really interested in the banking industry.



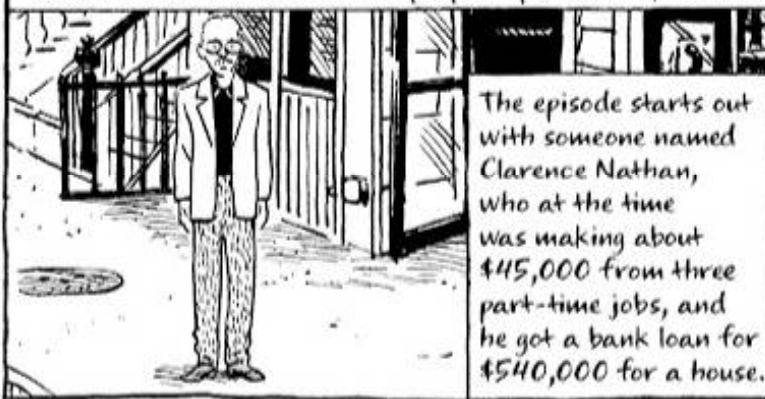
I had been wondering about this question of debt for a while. It seemed like so many people were borrowing so much money.



I remember, even in 2005, wondering about it. I became totally obsessed with this housing finance website called *Calculated Risk*. It was a place where skeptics about the housing bubble gathered.



Someone explained to him that banks were doing this thing that banks had not done in the history of banking, which is that they would give out loans to people who were not qualified to get loans, and the banks wouldn't even check what the people reported they earned.

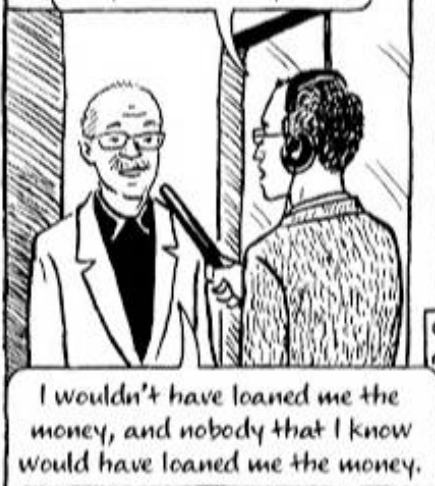


The episode starts out with someone named Clarence Nathan, who at the time was making about \$45,000 from three part-time jobs, and he got a bank loan for \$540,000 for a house.

"It's almost like you pass a guy in the street and say..."

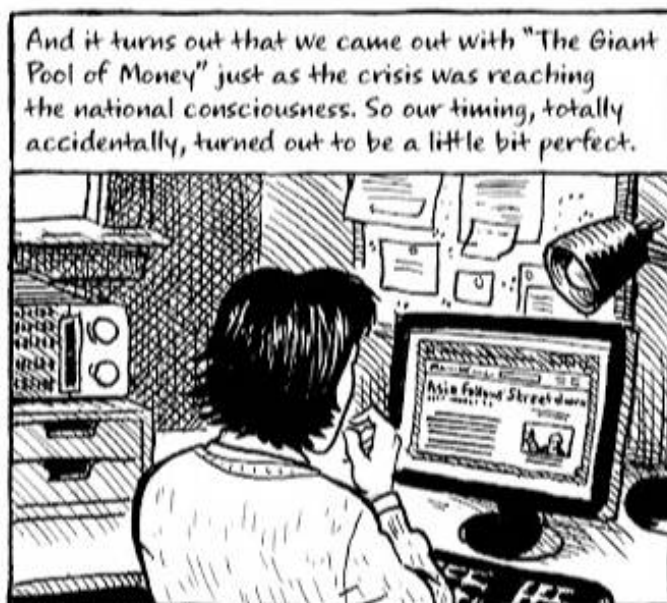
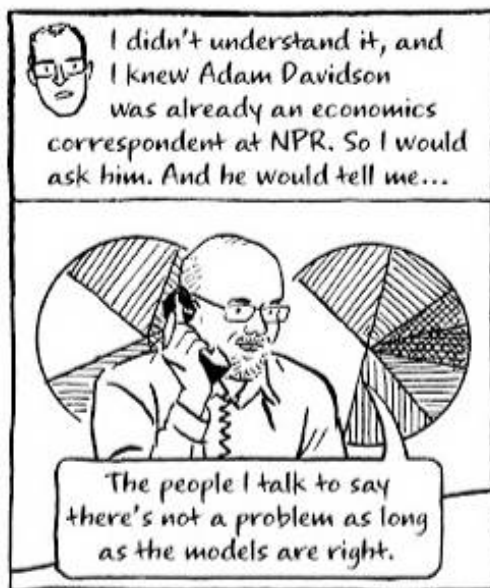


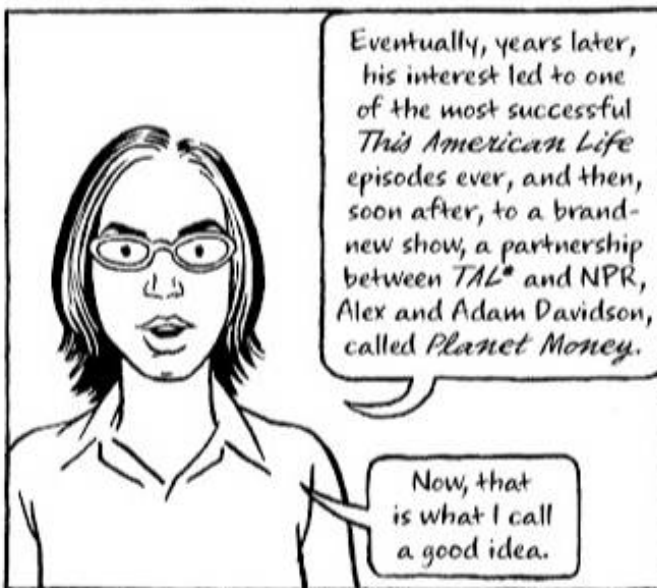
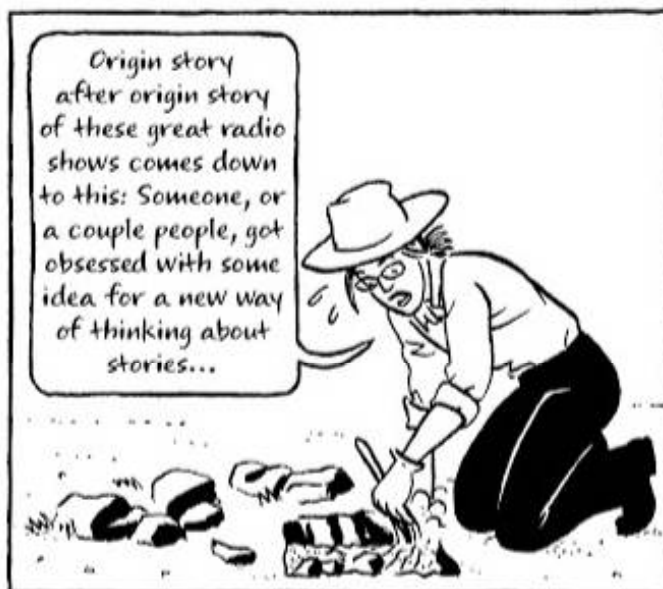
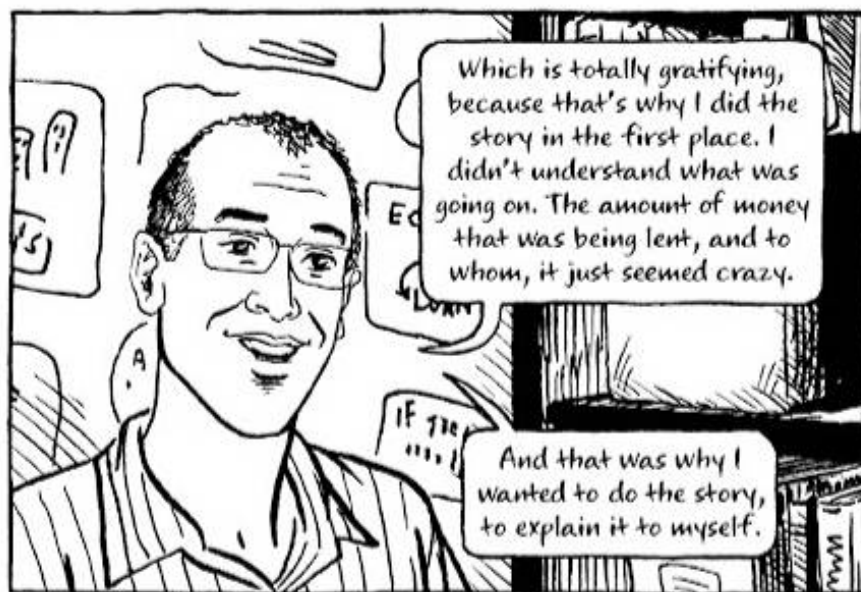
Would you have loaned you the money?"



I mean, I know guys that are criminals who wouldn't lend me that money and they break your kneecaps, so...ha ha ha!







\* A common shorthand for *This American Life*.





The focus sentence:

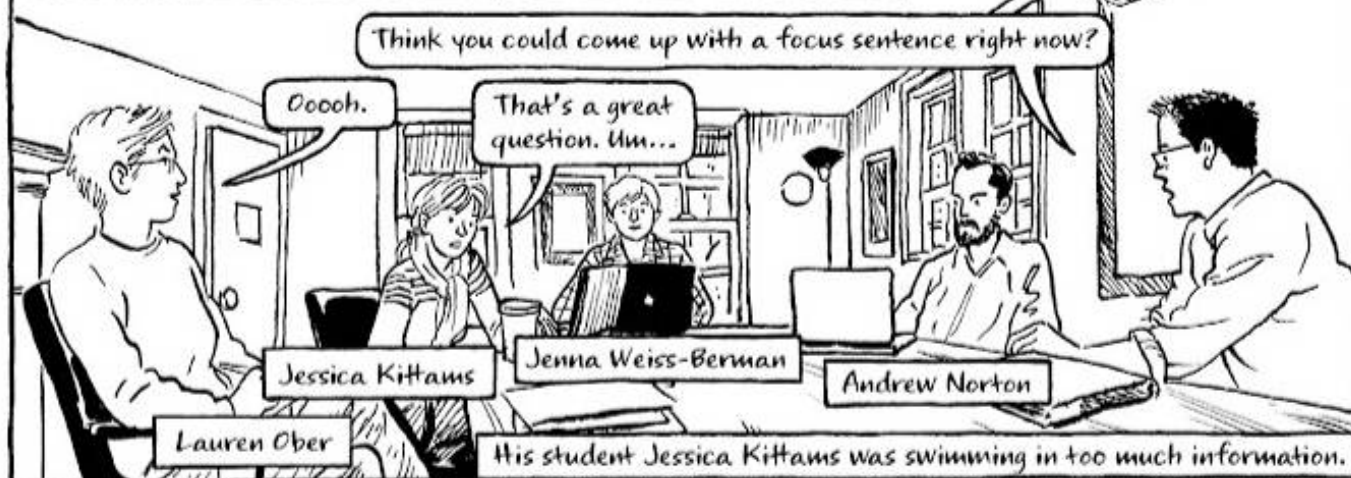
A character in motion.  
Doing something.

**Somebody does something**  
**because** \_\_\_\_\_  
**but** \_\_\_\_\_.

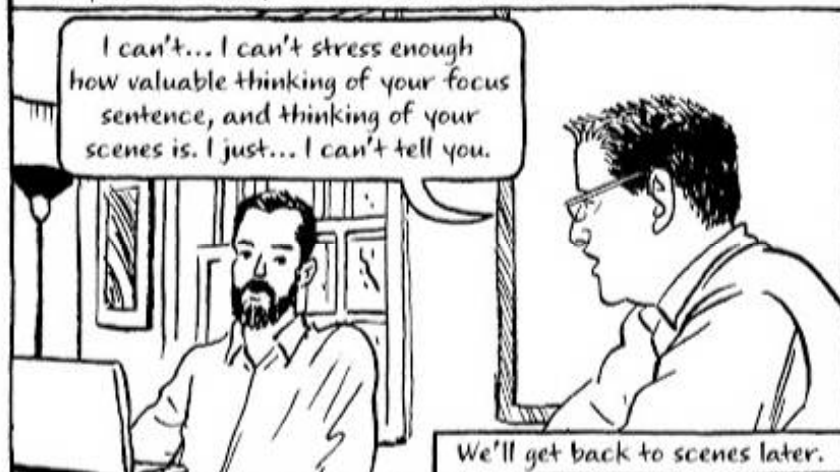
A motivation for  
doing that thing.

A challenge  
to overcome.

I met Rob when I visited the Transom Workshop, an intensive 8-week course he teaches for future producers of, uh, "narrative journalism."



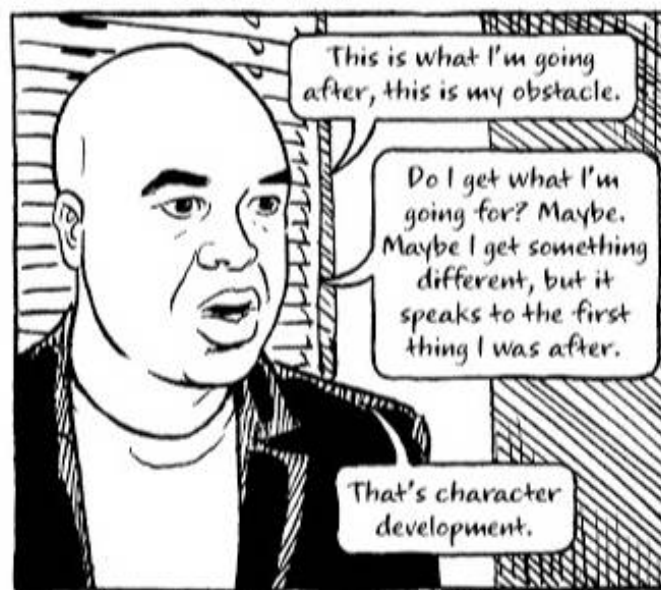
And the focus sentence, while it suggests a narrative arc, also allows for a process of figuring out what, if anything, in your research *fits* that narrative arc.



I love the word "focus" in "focus sentence." It gives you a path. And if you have that path, then you're more likely to get someplace worth going.



In the course of working on this book, I spoke to a lot of radio people. No one had heard of Rob's focus sentence (unless they'd taken Rob's class). But they all recognized the principle.



It sets up a question that begs answering.

You ask that question early on: What did the person want?

Somebody's gotta want something.

And that points the way to overall structure:

They get what they want. Or they don't get it, or what's interesting is the way they get it, or maybe they don't want it anymore. That's it, pretty much.

The focus sentence represents your hypothesis of what your story will be about.



And while you may be wrong in your hypothesis, you think... OK, I got these four interviews. They all seem pretty decent.

I have this bird's eye view of the subject and like, what do I do?

See if you can come up with a focus sentence, right?

It's early days, and you might turn out to have been wrong, but the mere process of thinking it through is part of the journey to figure that out.

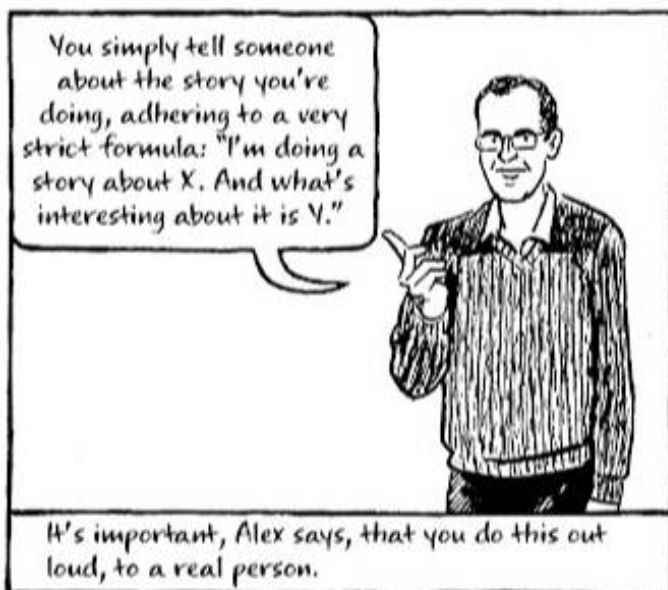
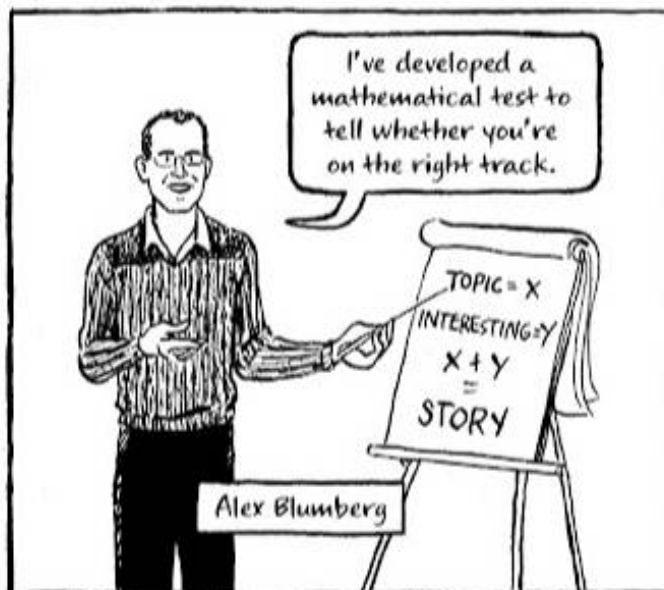
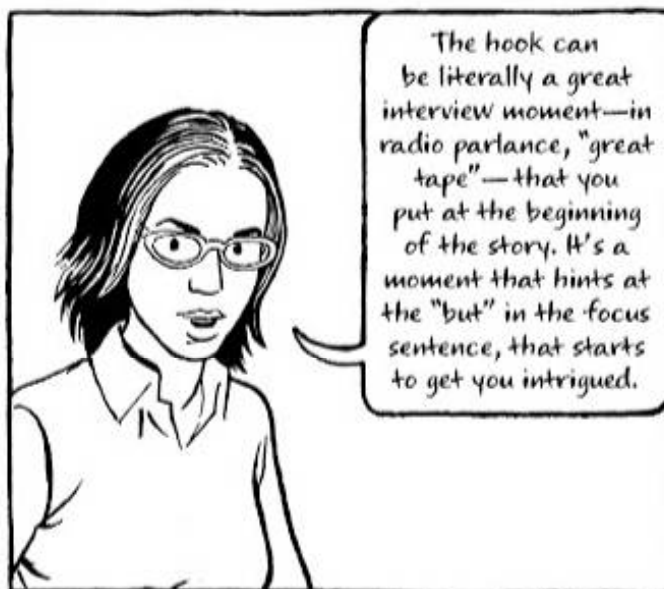
Then, based on the focus sentence, well, how do I want to tell the story?

I swear that's the way to help congeal all that information.

So, there, I'll stop. Should we take a break?

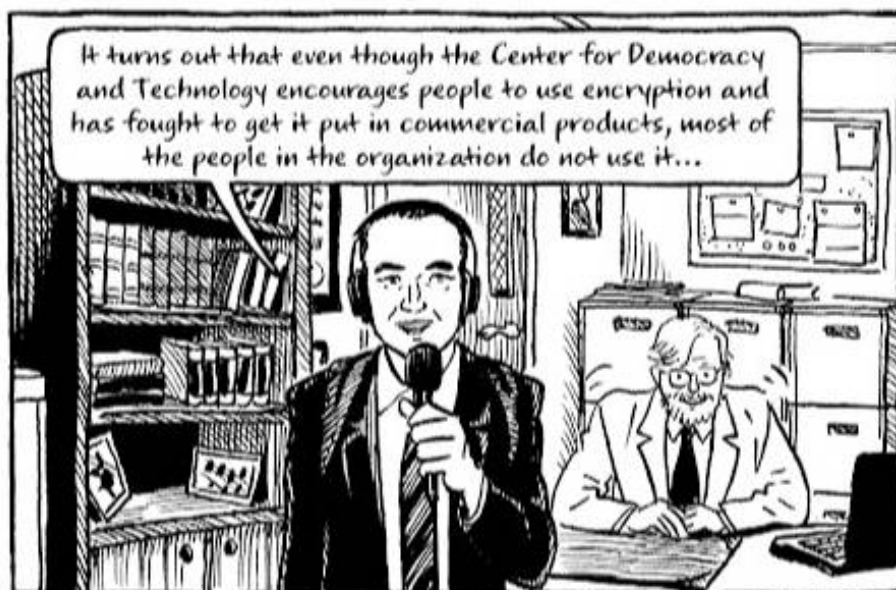
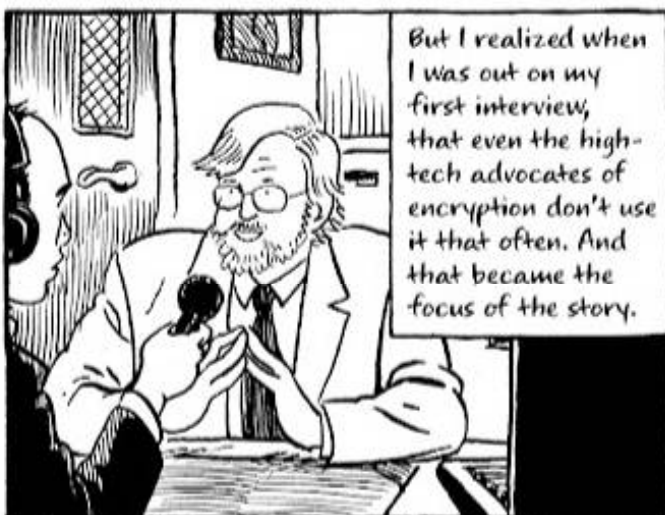
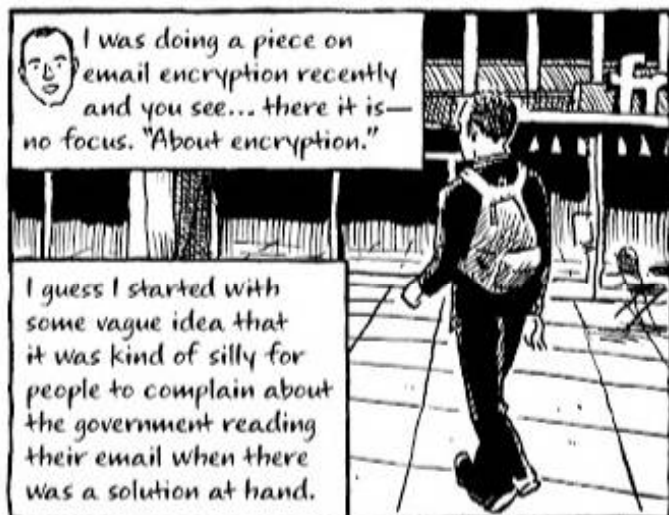
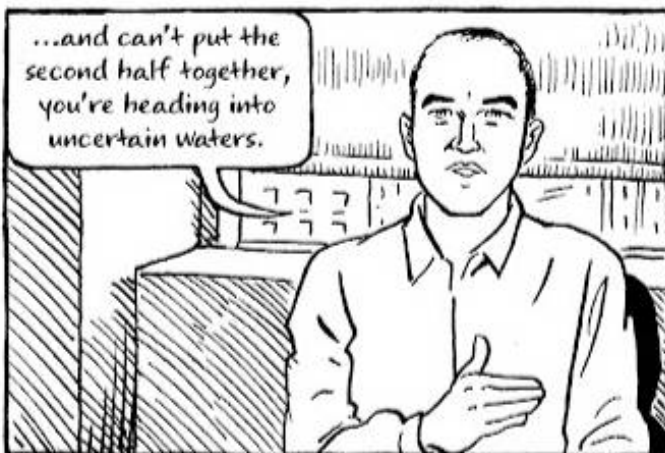




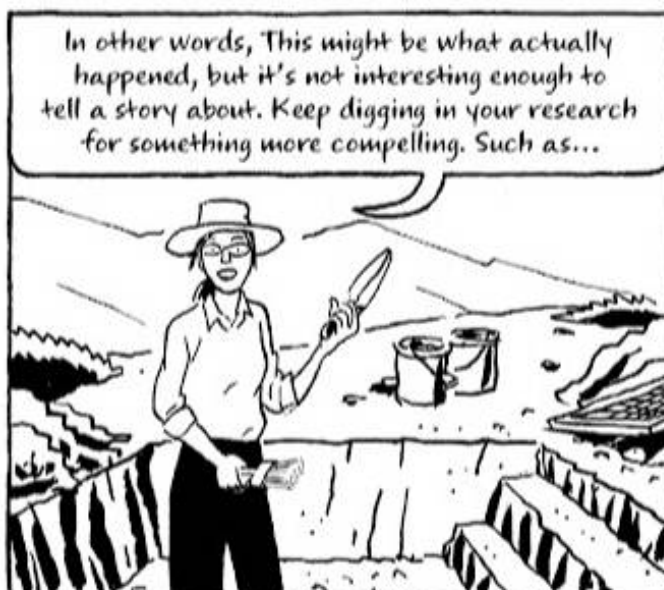
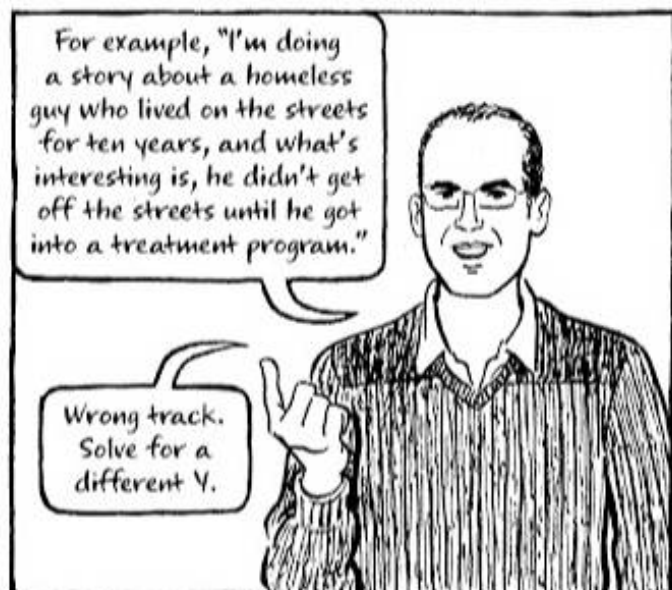
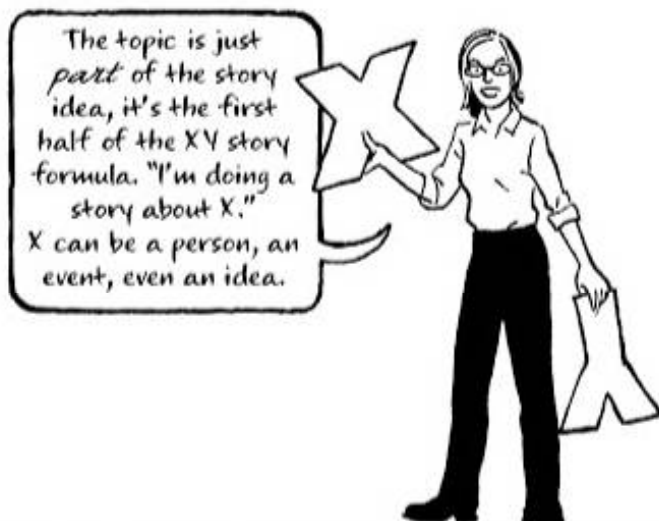
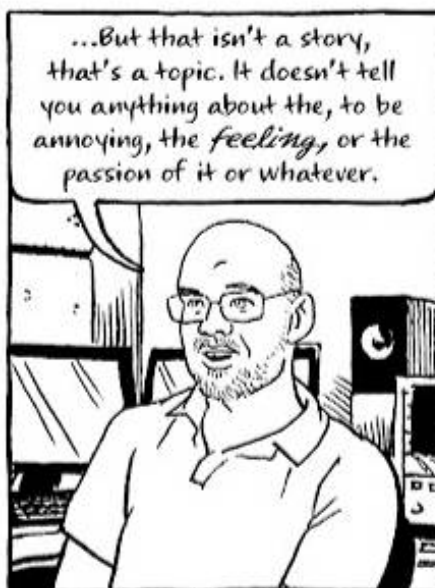


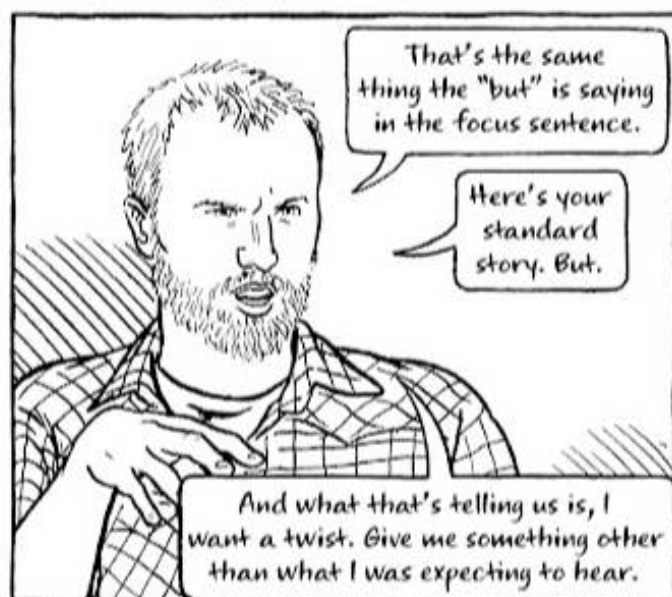
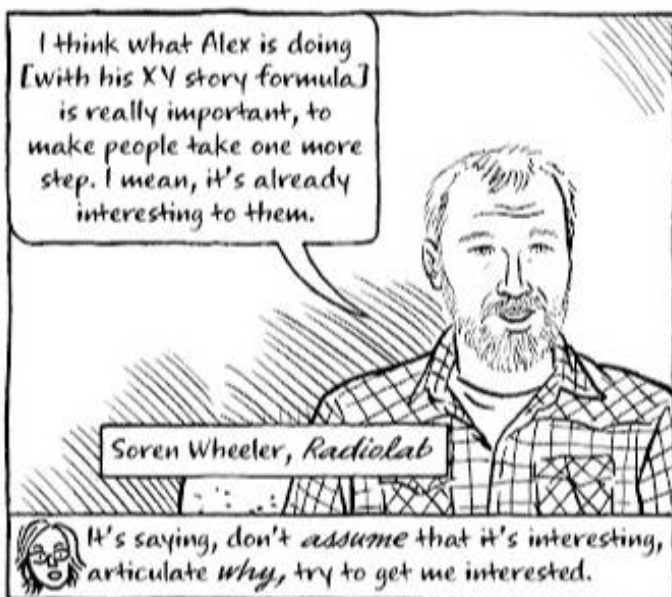
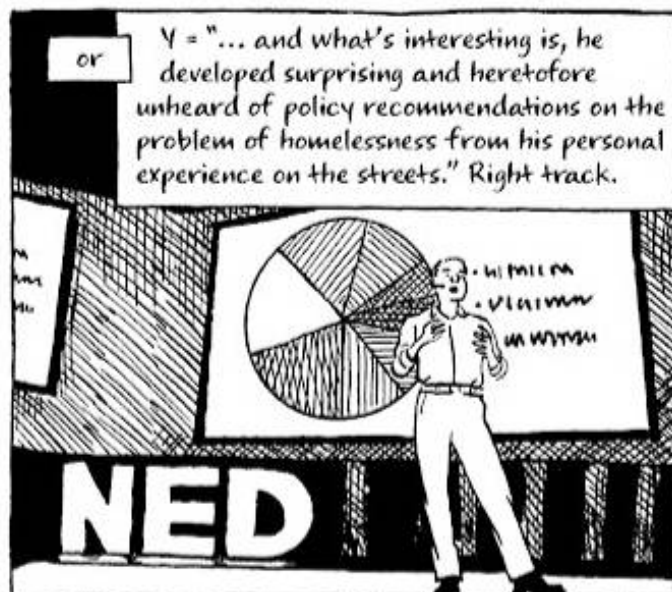
I'm doing a story about X. ← Topic

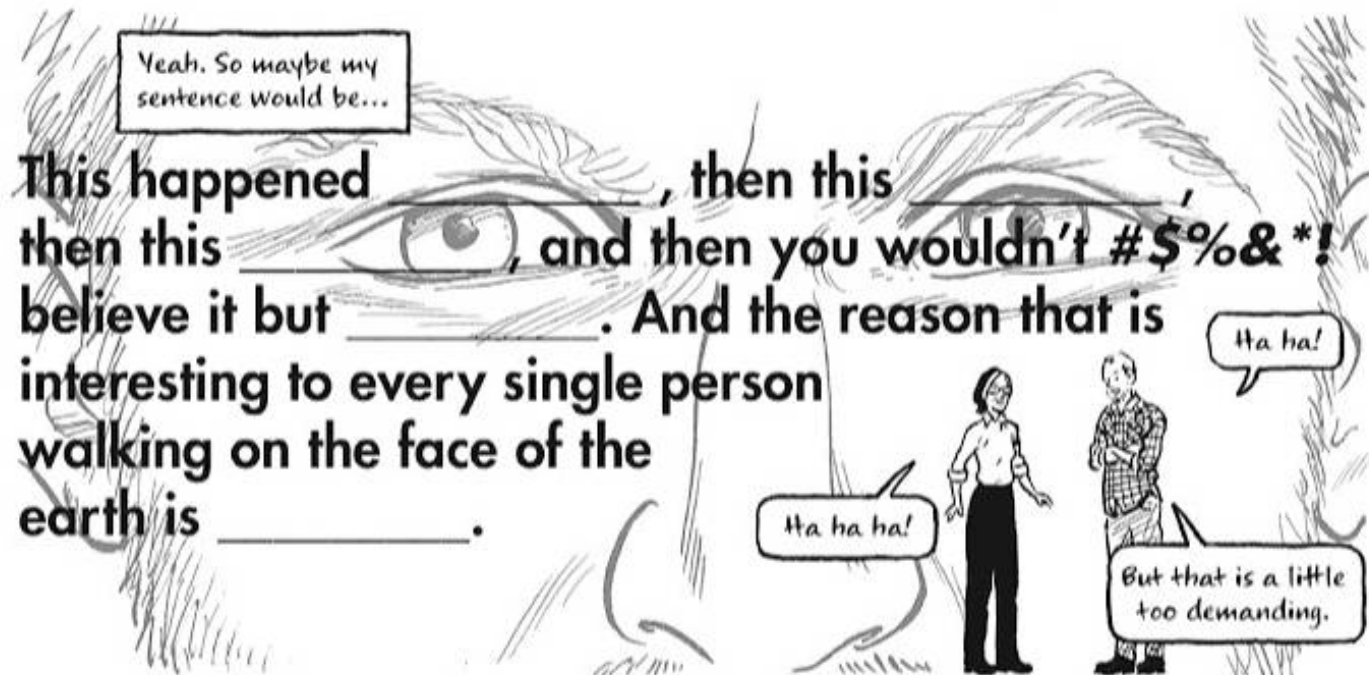
And what's interesting about it is Y. ← Story





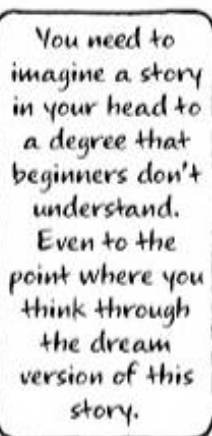


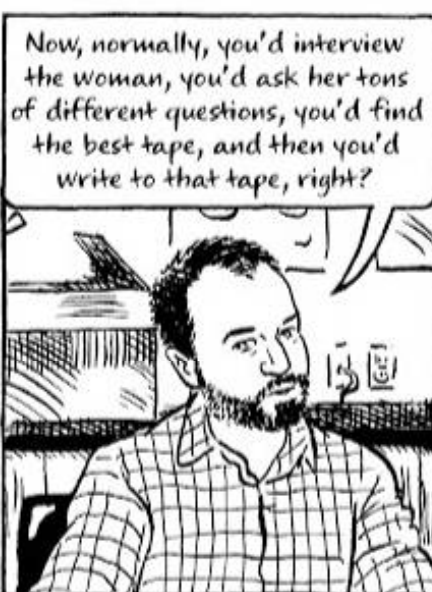
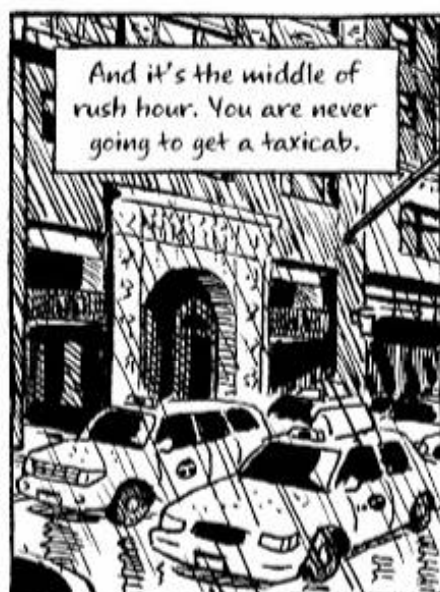


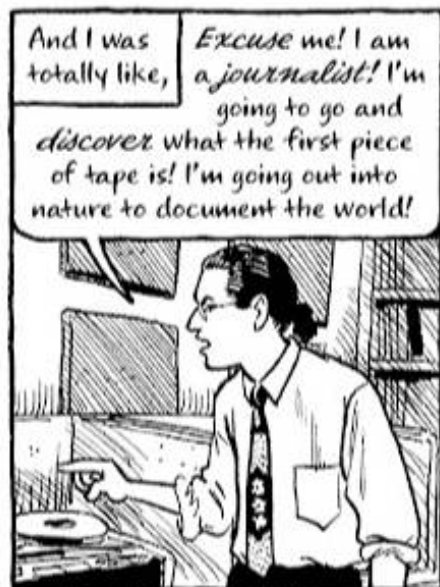
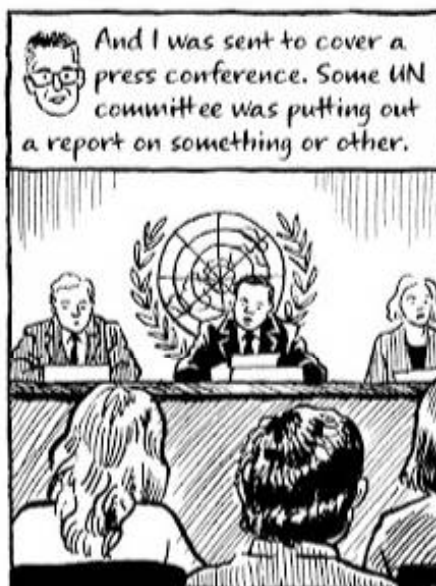
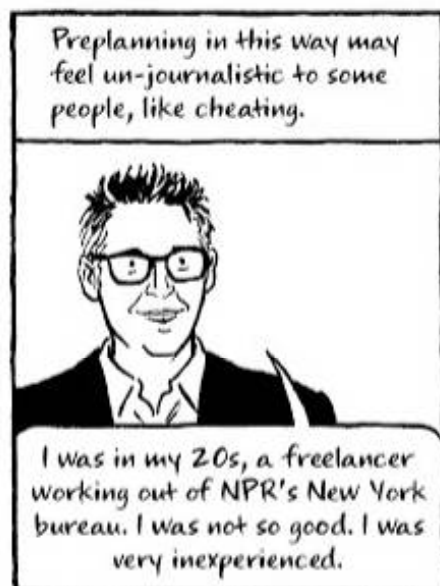




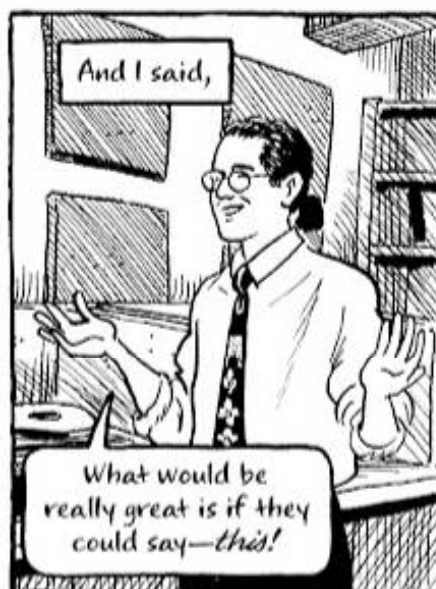
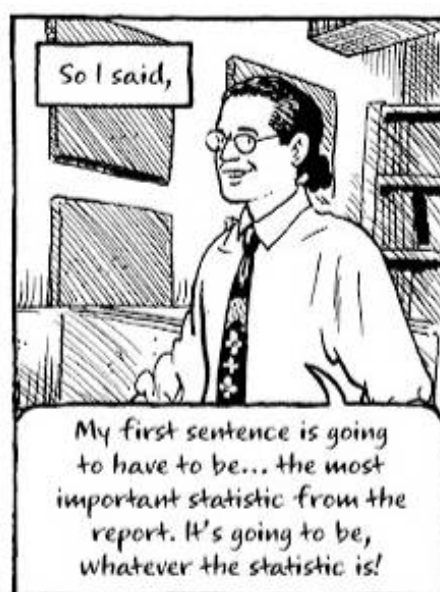
## LAYING THE FOUNDATION













For example, Robert Smith did this story with us on Colorado Springs, where a bunch of business-minded people came in and took over the city government and they decided the best way to run this town would be to privatize everything you can.



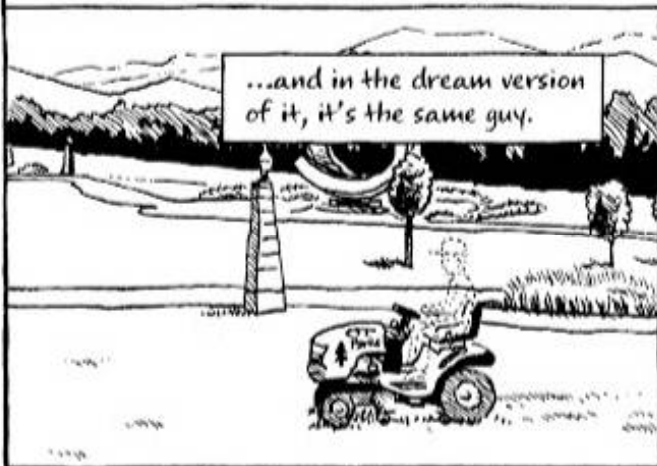
The first two thirds, you're going to explain how they got to this point, and in the last third you want to ask, "How's it working?"



And so I said, the dream scenario for the last third is: Somewhere there's a guy who used to mow the lawns for the parks department. And then they got rid of the parks department. So now, some new guy mows those same lawns, but he works for a private company.



And we'd ask each guy: What were your salary and benefits for mowing the lawns? What was the job like? We'd interview each of them.



And I got the call, and they were like...



And if you want to make things that are really special, sometimes you invent like a fiction writer, and then see if reality conforms to what you made up.



Jay Allison was the one who invited me to visit the Transom Workshop in Woods Hole, Massachusetts.

The phrase we use is, "The moment you know you have a story is the moment you realize it's not the story you thought it was."



Among many other things, he's the producer for *The Moth Radio Hour* and a founder of Transom.org, a huge site full of information on how to make radio.

And that requires that you be awake, and alert, and sensitive, and dynamic in your attitude.



He's also probably the foremost voice for what some people call the "slow radio" movement.

His own pieces are structured in various beautiful ways, but all this talk of preplanning and rules makes him a little itchy.



When I began in radio, the whole appeal for me was just going out with my tape recorder to see what happened.



I had no story theory. An interest in the basic subject was enough.

If I'd had to answer a lot of the story questions in advance, I'd not have gone out on 90% of the pieces I did.



Sometimes, the pieces ended up not being stories at all, but became found poems or montages or illustrated essays or little art pieces.

SONY  
SONY  
SONY

Sometimes the tape would sit on the shelf for months or years until it finally proclaimed what it was about.

Sometimes characters from one piece would start talking to characters from another piece and I'd bring them together.

There was never any way to know, or even guess, in advance. It was all a surprise.

The bad part was that a lot of time was wasted and a lot of stories were tepid.





The good part was that there were discoveries of things I had no idea even to look for.



That's what I'd like to hear more of on public radio: the real wild card, the story no one could ever have thought of in advance.

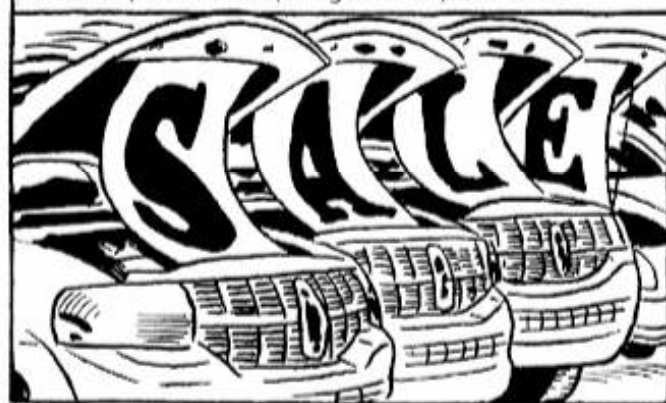
Just go without a plan and discover what's going to happen?



That's a valid way to work if you have a lot of time. And if you also have a lot of tolerance for being lost for a long period of time. Many of us, me included, feel anxiety when we don't know the shape of the final story. And I don't enjoy living with that anxiety.

And you will know which kind of person you are.

We're doing an episode in three or four weeks at a car dealership in Long Island. And at the end of the month, a car dealership has to make a quota. And for the last two days they basically will do anything to sell you a car.



And we wanted to document that, because it's very tense and hard.

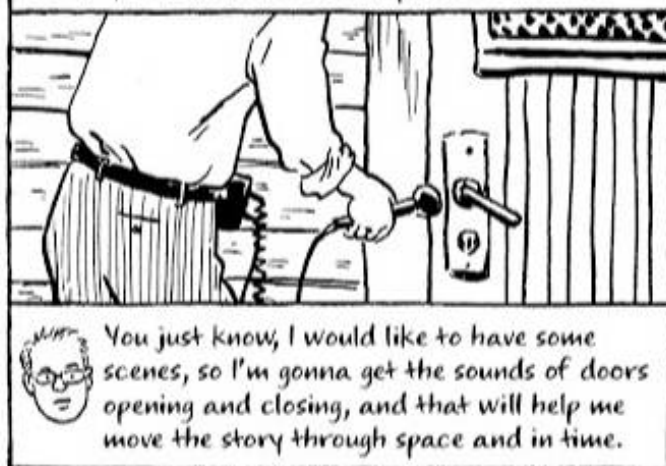


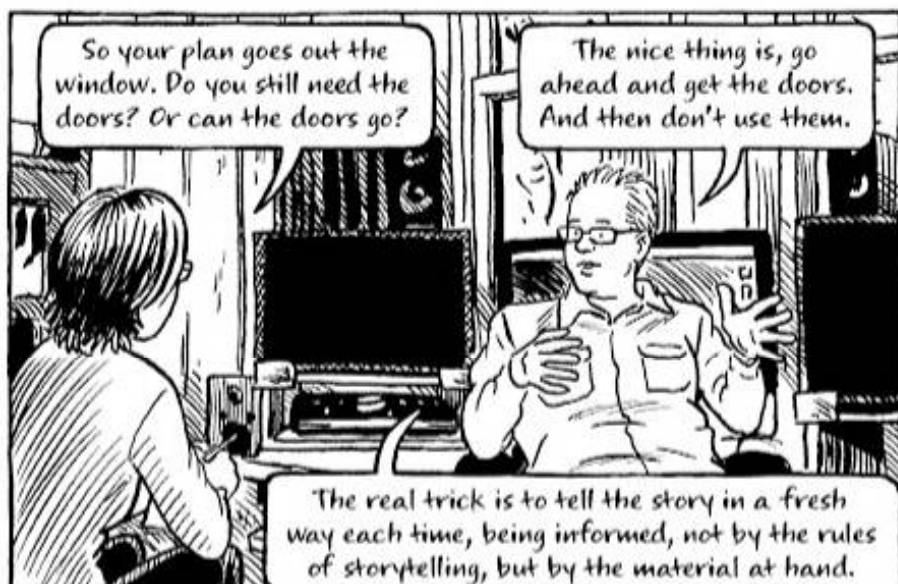
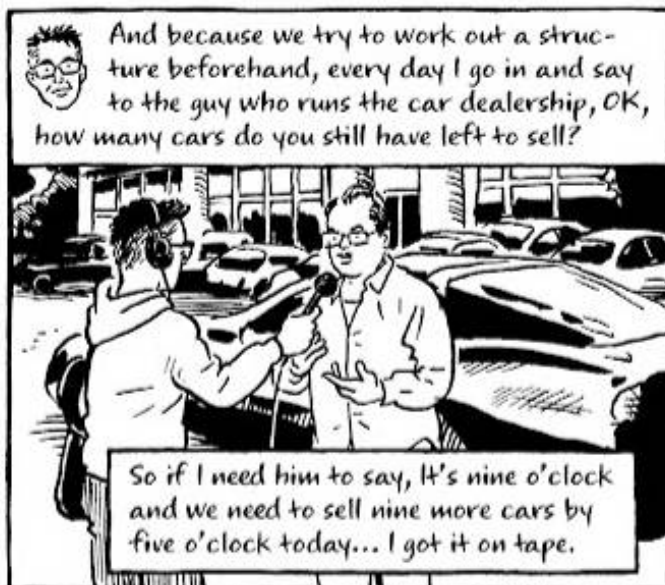
In the tape gathering, you could just go and see what will happen, but it's better to go in with a plan. Without one, there are things you would miss.

Many people will try to decide ahead of time what the story might be. And it's useful. It is good to gather tape that way.



Ingredients, such as recordings of sounds that might help the listener understand that you've moved from one place to another.





## THE (EVEN) BIGGER PICTURE

Soren Wheeler nailed it when he said, "I want to hear some reason for that story to exist."



I read Soren's "focus sentence" to Chana Joffe-Walt to see what she thought.

That is exactly the structure and model of many, many stories that I've done, but sometimes with a slight tweak.



Chana Joffe-Walt, *Planet Money*

Instead of "You wouldn't iø\$%&\*! believe it," it's...

"...this is that *thing* that we all do."



That's a smaller way of saying, "This is universal."

I think that is more my personal style than, "you wouldn't iø\$%&\*! believe it, it's huge, and totally changes everything."



I can find characters, I can get them to tell stories, and I can put it all in an order that makes you want to find out what happens next.

Which is, without a doubt, a valuable, even an amazing skill.



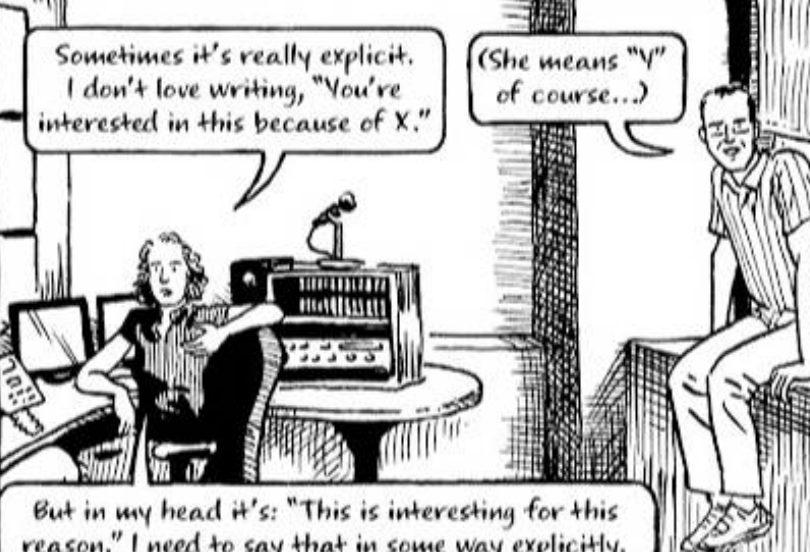
Except that you need a reason to listen. That doesn't come naturally to me, and I don't think I really recognized the need for it.

And I often have a moment, a third of the way into writing, where I'm like, How do I get to where I'm stepping back.



And the thoughts that I'm usually having are, Oh, this is like that thing that everyone experiences. This is interesting because...

Sometimes it's really explicit. I don't love writing, "You're interested in this because of X."



(She means "Y" of course...)

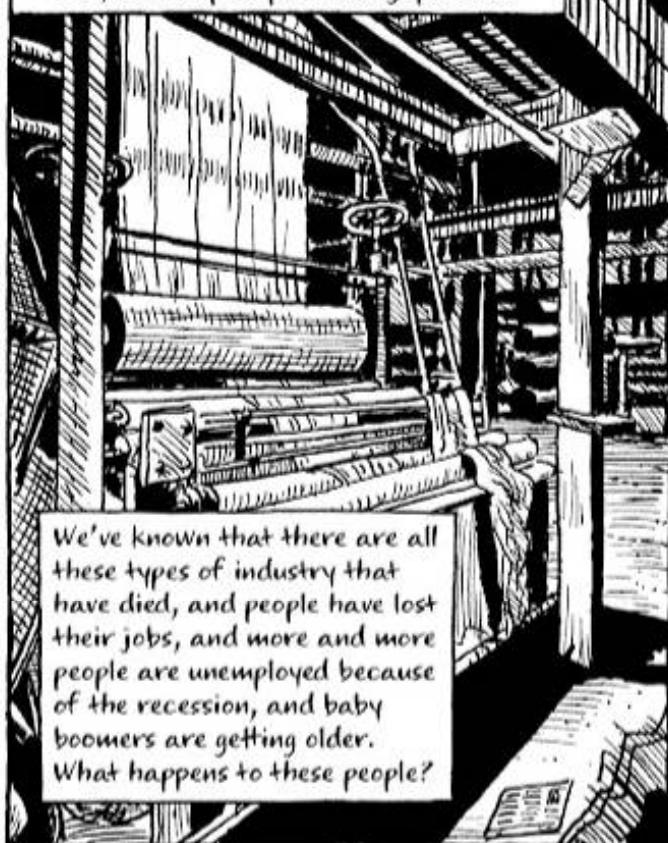
But in my head it's: "This is interesting for this reason." I need to say that in some way explicitly.



Chana did an hour-long story on why there has been a huge increase in the number of people in the Social Security disability insurance program. But notice, that's a topic, not a story.



The disability show came out of the idea that there's a system that's interesting, and looking at it as a system helps explain a big question.



We've known that there are all these types of industry that have died, and people have lost their jobs, and more and more people are unemployed because of the recession, and baby boomers are getting older. What happens to these people?

These moments, where Chana makes connections to something larger, is what radio producers call "framing."



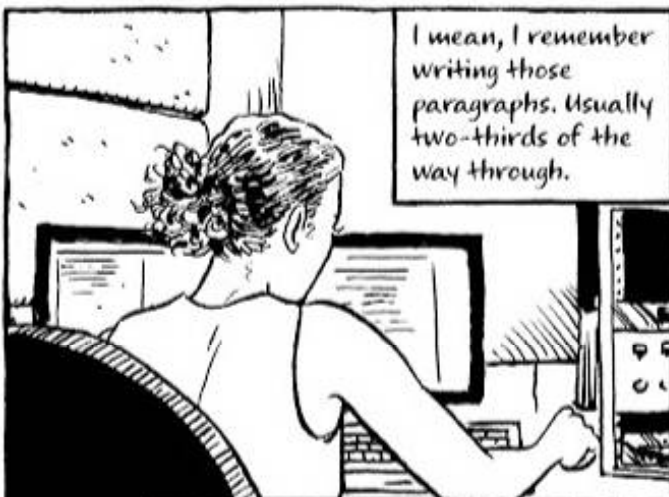
For example, I could say, "These radio producers are continuing a tradition of oral storytelling that goes back a very long way."

I tried to choose sections for the story that would illustrate that this system is doing something that you didn't realize that it was doing, that it's a stand-in for welfare, basically.



I'm sure that if you broke down each part there is a paragraph saying, Here's why this is interesting.

I mean, I remember writing those paragraphs. Usually two-thirds of the way through.



Those paragraphs take the topic and transform it into a story.

Framing is the part of the story where you're given some context, and you see the larger implications of the story. Or it's where complex ideas are translated into direct, emotional language.



Framing is a huge part of how you take a predictable story, one we've all heard before, and turn it into something truly new and memorable.



In one section I'm talking to a woman in Hale County, Alabama, named Ethel Thomas, whose back was injured. And she was looking for lots of jobs, and she couldn't find one, and she went on disability for her back injury.



In your dream world, if you could have a different job that you could do with your back, what would that be? You're shaking your head.



And I asked, What about a job where you could sit down? And she just, it had never even occurred to her that such a job existed.

Mmm. I hadn't really thought about it.



It just did not seem possible to me that there would be a place in America today where someone could go her whole working life without any exposure to jobs where you get to sit.

And I started sort of casually looking. At McDonald's, they're all standing. There's a truck mechanic, no. A fish plant, definitely no. I looked at the jobs listings in Greensboro—occupational therapist, McDonald's, McDonald's, truck driver, heavy lifting, KFC, registered nurse, McDonald's.



I actually think it might be possible that Ethel could not conceive of a job that would accommodate her pain.

That felt like a powerful moment to me, and I thought, Other people will think this is surprising too, and so I included it for that reason.



I didn't think that it would be a moment of revelation for people. But when people talk about the show, that's the thing that they remember.

Yeah, actually, that's the moment that I had in my head.



The idea that people go on disability basically because there's no way for them to find work that can accommodate them in any way—that seemed like a totally new piece of information to me.

It feels like it is a way of understanding a huge class of American workers. For people who work in offices every day, that is not a familiar reality.



In some sense, in a shameful way. Like, I was ashamed of my surprise in that situation.

I had gone to Hale County because they had really high numbers of people on disability. But I didn't go knowing that that was going to be the takeaway.



Honestly, I was day five into that reporting trip and felt really distraught about not having anything other than the really predictable stories.

"People who don't have enough education and don't have the right skills for the new economy don't have jobs."

"People work in really physical jobs, and they get injured in their jobs and disability is what's available to them."

And that just didn't feel like it was...



It can't be the whole thing.

It can't be the whole thing.



The point is, she doesn't have the right skills for jobs that exist. And this is the option for her.



And that's really what makes it. That is the moment that makes it feel like it's about something bigger, and something new, and something interesting.





Catherine Burns, artistic director of The Moth, told me how they choose stories for their Mainstage. The best Moth stories hinge on moments when the storyteller teetered on the brink of a dilemma, the outcome of which changed his or her life.



One of the first things we say to the storyteller is: We're looking for the story about how you became you. And that's a tall order, obviously.

But that is what we are striving for every single time.



We're looking for the arc. The simplest way to say it is: Who are you at the beginning...

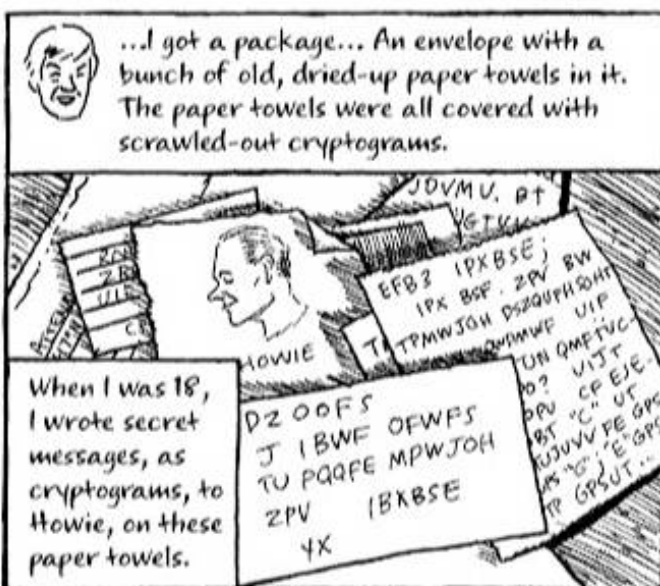
When I was seventy, my first murder mystery was published by St. Martin's Press. I've now had ten published.

About six months ago, a mystery came into my life.

Cynthia Riggs



...and who are you at the end?



...I got a package... An envelope with a bunch of old, dried-up paper towels in it. The paper towels were all covered with scrawled-out cryptograms.

When I was 18, I wrote secret messages, as cryptograms, to Howie, on these paper towels.



He'd kept them for 62 years.

I have a group of young women in my Wednesday writers' group, and they all said, "You've got to get in touch with this guy!"





Sean Cole did a story for *Radiolab* about Mel Blanc, the voice actor best known for Bugs Bunny, Elmer Fudd, and a hundred other cartoon characters. When Blanc was in a car accident and fell into a coma, the weird thing (the very convincing Y in the Blumberg XY of this story) is that he did not respond when his son addressed him as Daddy, but he did when addressed as Bugs Bunny.

But for *Radiolab*, and for all the best narrative radio shows, just plain "interesting" is not enough.

Jad might say, I love it up to here, but after that... like in the Mel Blanc story. Narratively, there is a gaping hole. I don't understand this.



What was Jad missing?



He was missing like, why? Why didn't Mel Blanc respond to...

Dad, can you hear me?



...but did respond to...

Bugs Bunny, how are you doing today?



There's some transformation a listener should have. And we just didn't have anything.

We didn't feel close to the guy at the heart of the story. You always felt like he was at a polite distance.

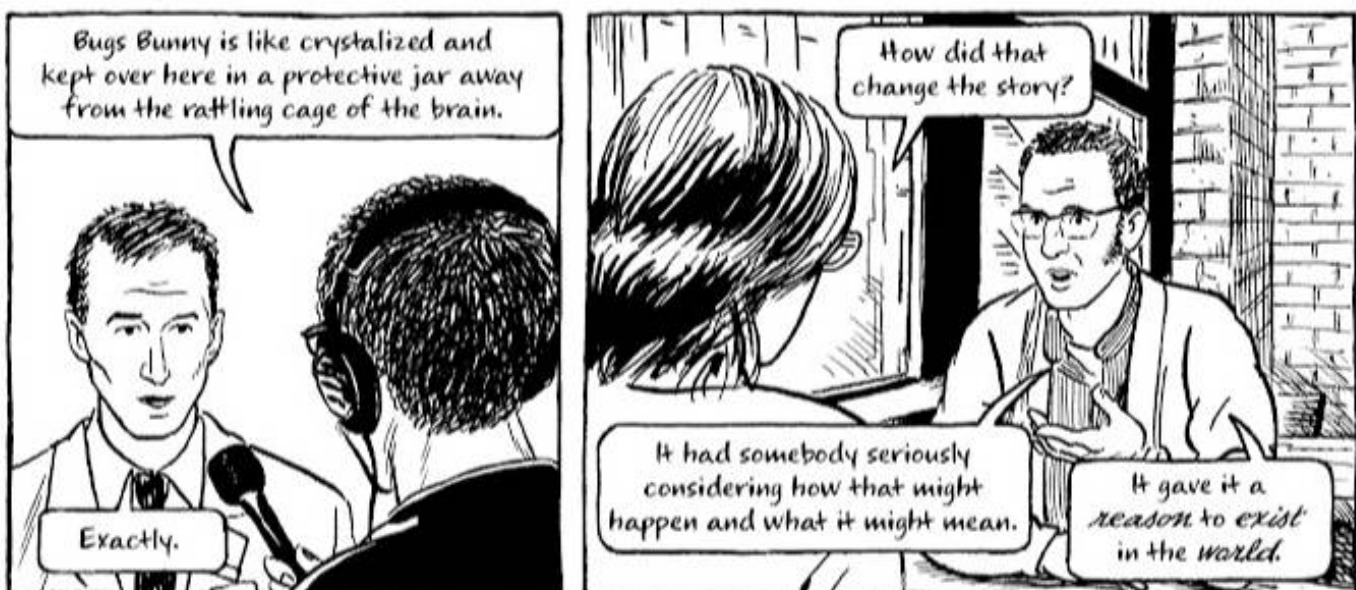
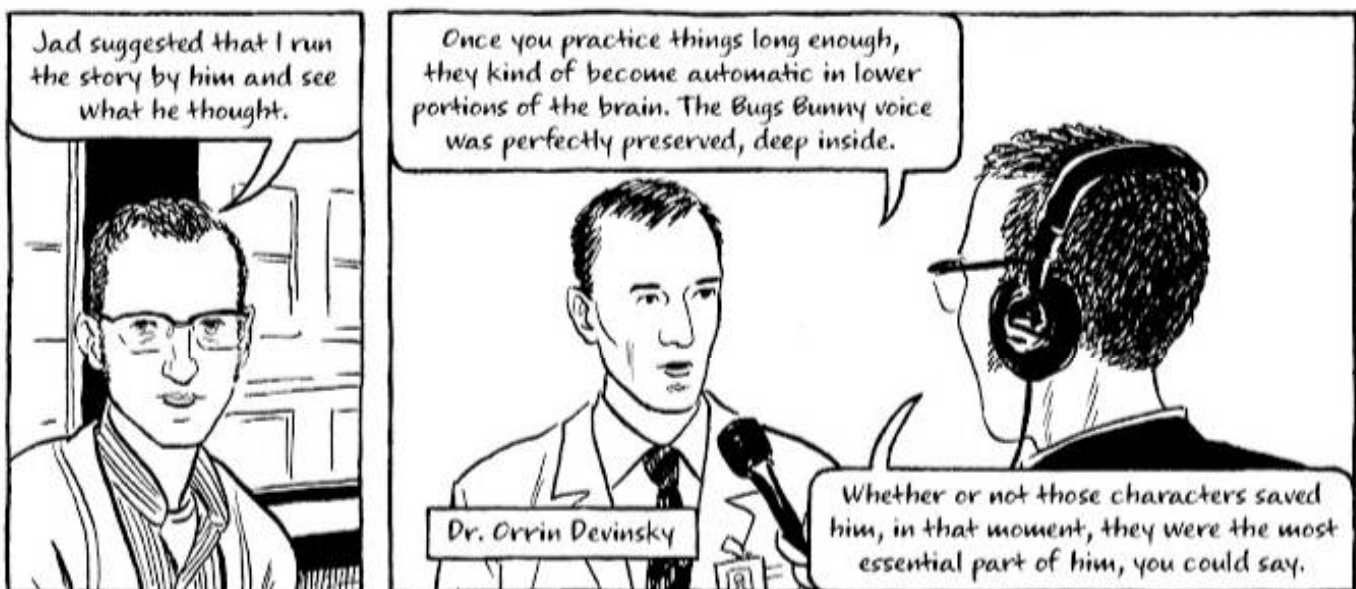


It was a bunch of fun thoughts and fun music and sound design, but there was no anchor. It still wasn't landing somehow.



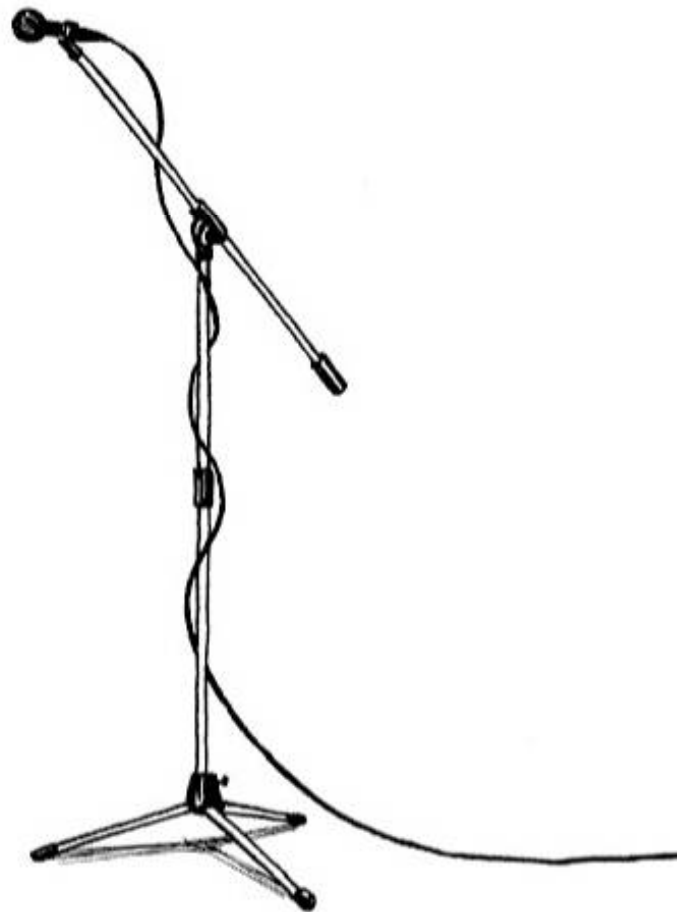
So we went back to his son Noel, and we were like, Why would your dad talk to you as Bugs, hasn't it ever occurred to you that that's weird?

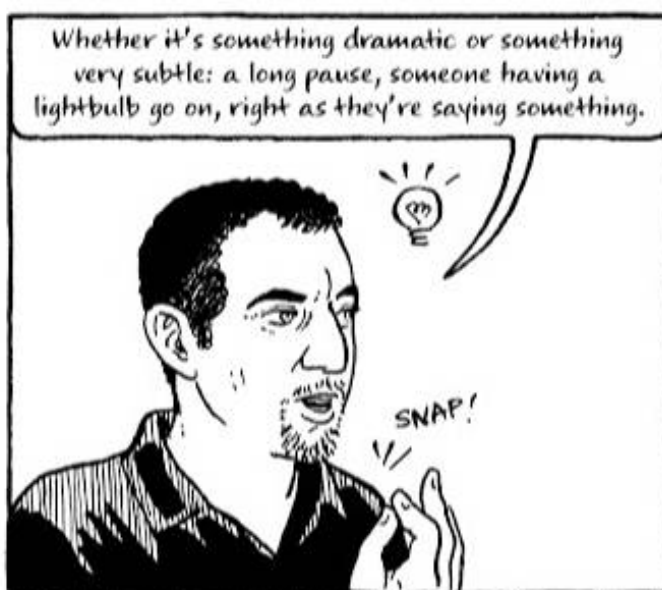




THE HEAT OF THEIR BREATH:

# Character and Voice







*Radio Diaries* is a show that works with people to help them tell their own stories.



Producer Joe Richman hands a person a recorder, and works with him or her for up to a year to self-record. Then Joe edits a story from that material.

Joe uses a style often known as "non-narrated," meaning he uses only the diarists' recordings of themselves and their friends and family to construct his story.



"Non-narrated" is kind of a misnomer in this case. The stories *are* narrated—by the diarist. There is no reporter and there is no script.

This means the tape-gathering Joe needs to do is that much more demanding. If the person doesn't say what he needs, in the way that he needs it, well, he's gotta come up with some other way to tell the story.



The advantage to this way of working is that the way people speak becomes much more a part of the story, and that can make characters come alive in a way that no other style can.



I just know it's happening right there. I think the listener knows. And you want to experience something as the listener, not just be told.



And perhaps the most important, most magic ingredient of the kind of stories that make you just stop, and pay attention, is a character experiencing a change in his or her life, right there, as you listen.



*Radio Diaries* is documentary. People simply live their lives and tell us what happens day by day. And then that material is edited very heavily to construct a narrative after the fact.

The Moth is true stories told onstage by the people who lived them.



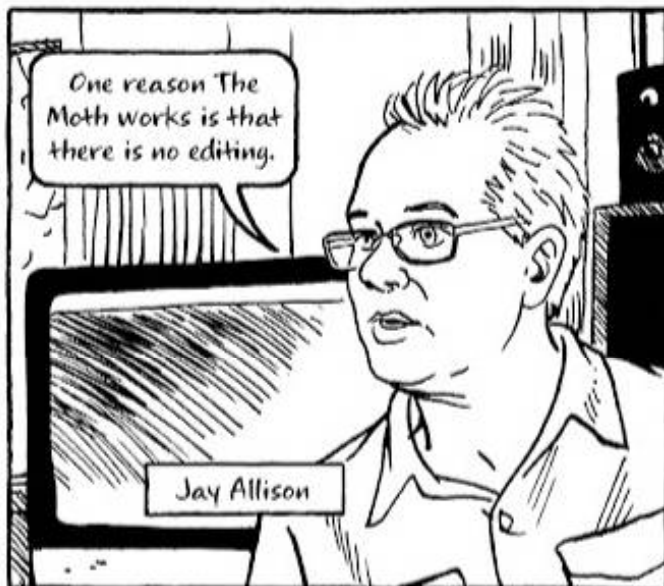
It's a different animal, of course: on *The Moth*, people construct their stories, they set out to entertain and capture the audience. And then the stories run virtually unedited on the air.

But the heart of the two approaches is similar. Stories of people confronting change.



One reason *The Moth* works is that there is no editing.

Jay Allison



There are no lights, there is no CGI, there are no effects.

There's no script. It's stripped away.

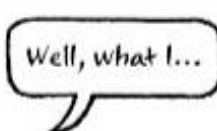


And if people don't honor that, their stories don't work.



If people don't get out on the wire...well out on the center of that wire, where it's bouncing...







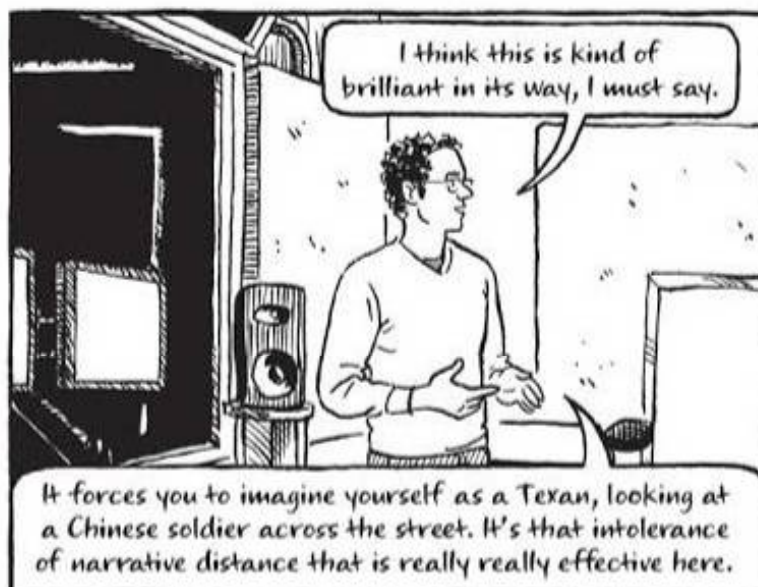




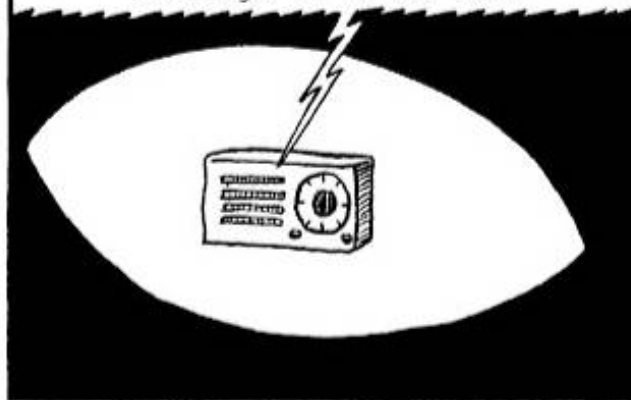
Imagine they were here under the auspices of "keeping us safe" or "promoting democracy" or "protecting their strategic interests."



Imagine that thousands of armed foreign troops were constantly patrolling American streets in military vehicles.



But, when we're in one of those modes where we are helping people understand something, your job then is actually to shift into the perspective of the listener, of a person who is hearing it for the first time.



So, if there's difficult information that's being hurled at me, and thus at the listener, by the interviewee, then I should take this and shape this into a picture that I can understand.



To let listeners walk in another person's shoes. That's the mission.



If I was doing a news story about AIDS, I might try to find someone who goes against type, you know, a wealthy white woman in South Africa who is HIV-positive.



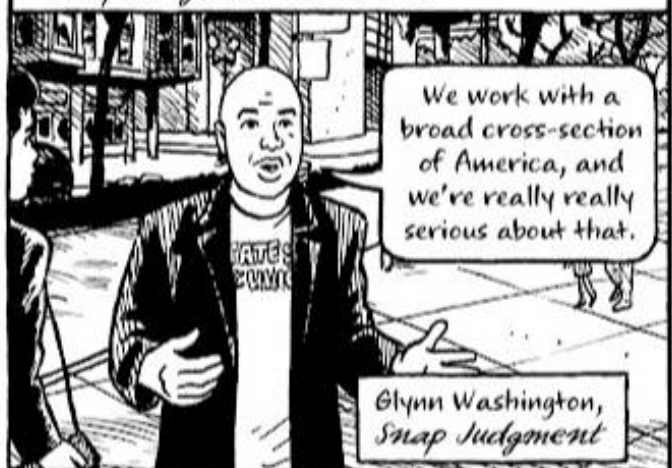
But with the Diaries it's almost like, find the cliché, find the stereotype, and then bust it by making it a three-dimensional, real person.

It's a potentially radical mission.



I think that's the way you can make these statistics, or these clichés, or these cardboard *symbols* of certain people that we have in our minds, and make them like family members. That's the goal of the Diaries.

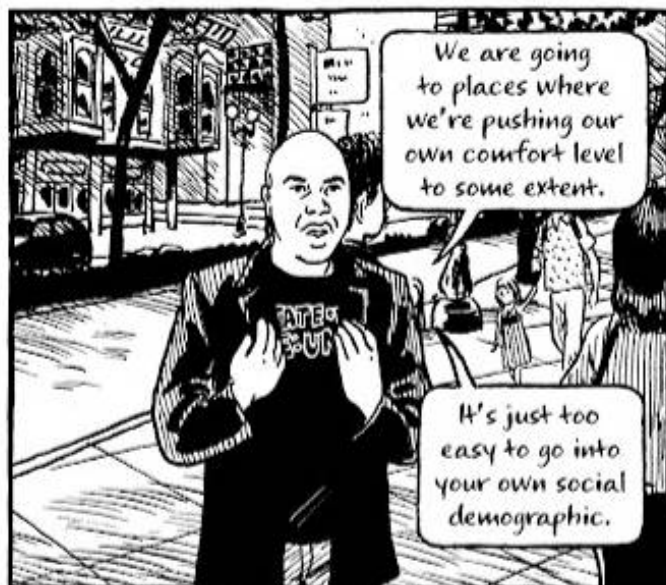
There are different approaches to the mission. Radiolab creates metaphors, interprets. Snap Judgment tries not to.



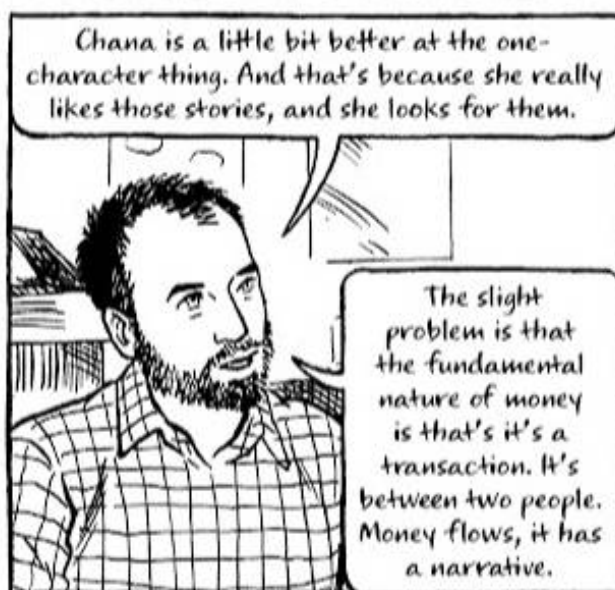
We work with a broad cross-section of America, and we're really really serious about that.

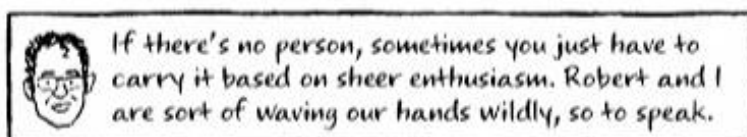
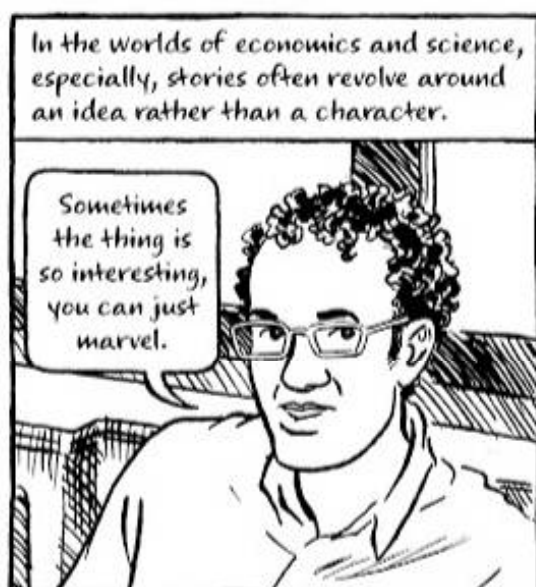
Glynn Washington, Snap Judgment





Finding characters who not only have amazing stories to tell, but who can tell them well, that's the unsung battle in this kind of work.





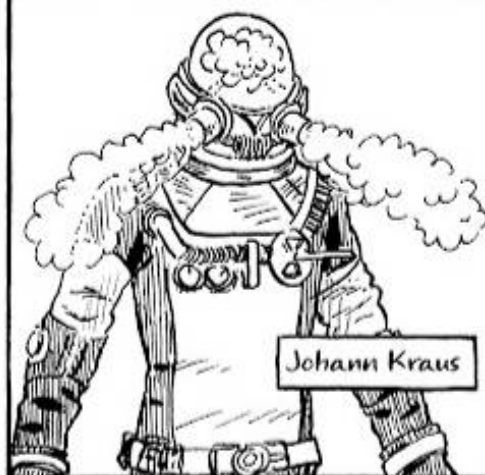
We have to work really hard to create a kind of wind of enthusiasm.







One of the characters was smoke. He needed the form of his armor in order to walk. But actually his true nature was smoke.



I often think of our stories and the ideas within them in the same way. The character and actions and plot are like the armor that these ideas can inhabit.

But if they don't inhabit some form, they become just like smoke, you can't grasp them.

And in some ways the ideas without the form are dangerous. They are overly abstract, they lose their humanity.



But you also don't want to go with that sort of classic anecdote/object lesson format that a lot of storytelling gets to.



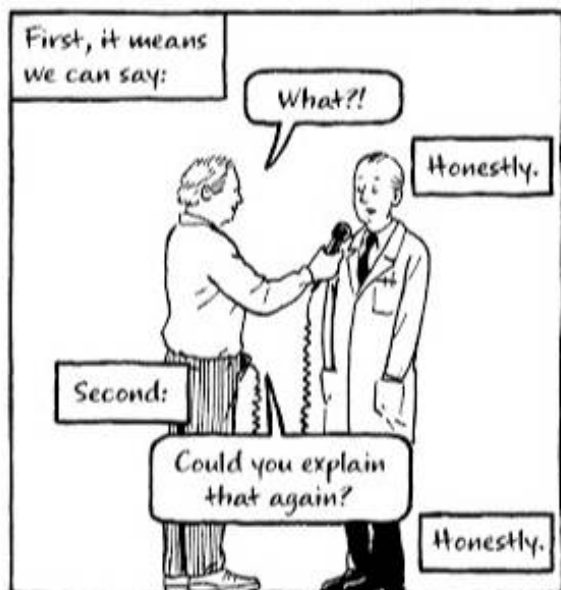
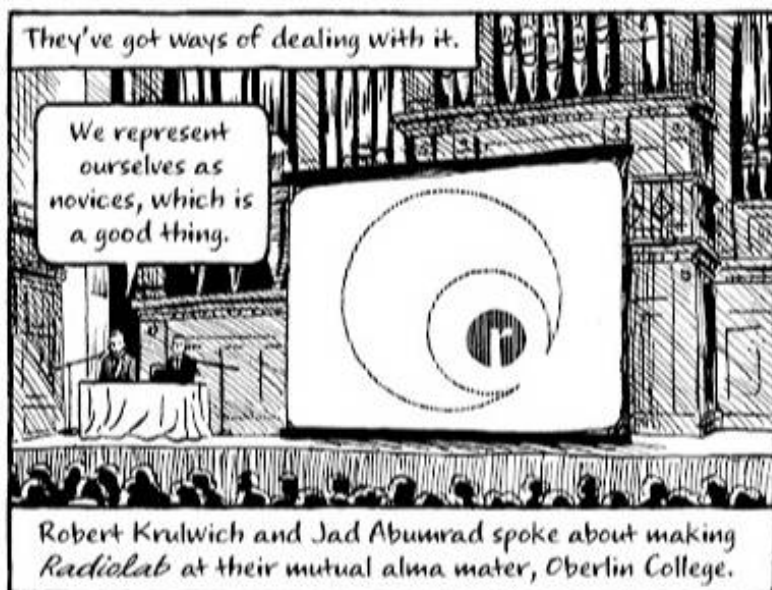
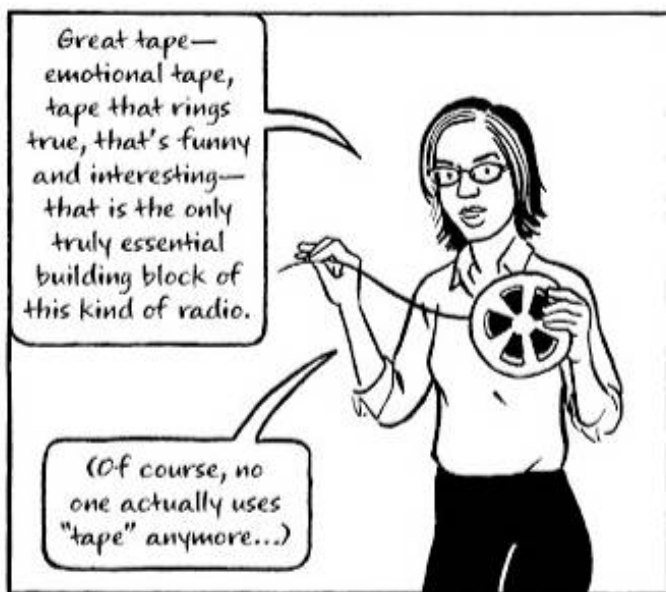
In a lot of pop science writing you'll see: here's an anecdote, and now here's the lesson. Here's a study, and now here's the lesson.

We are not interested in that kind of stuff.



I want to experience the world as ideas flowing through people.

I want to see it contained within the breath of some human being just getting their coat on and walking out the door.



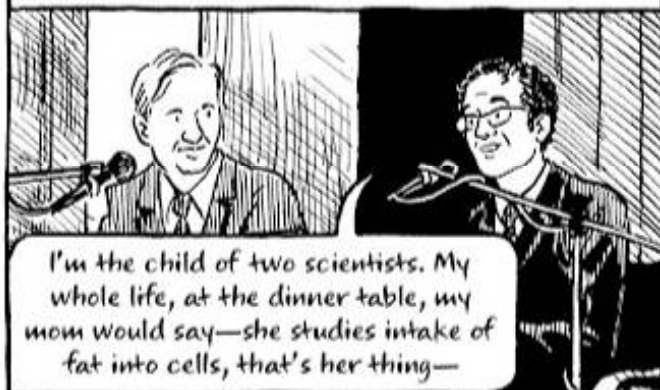
And third, it allows us to challenge these people as though we were ordinary curious folks. We argue with them, and they give right back.



We are trying to model a kind of conversation with important people, powerful people, and particularly with knowledgeable people.



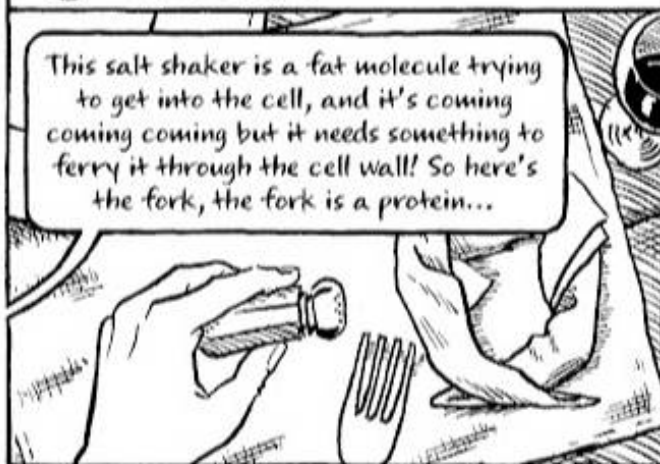
Including experts in stories can cause problems: Cutting to a professor or pundit to support someone's position can end up looking like you don't trust your storyteller. It undercuts them. It's often best to just let the character tell the story.



But sometimes you've got to talk to an expert, and the job then is to find the ordinary human inside. That means clear language, but it also means helping the interviewees to find their true voices.



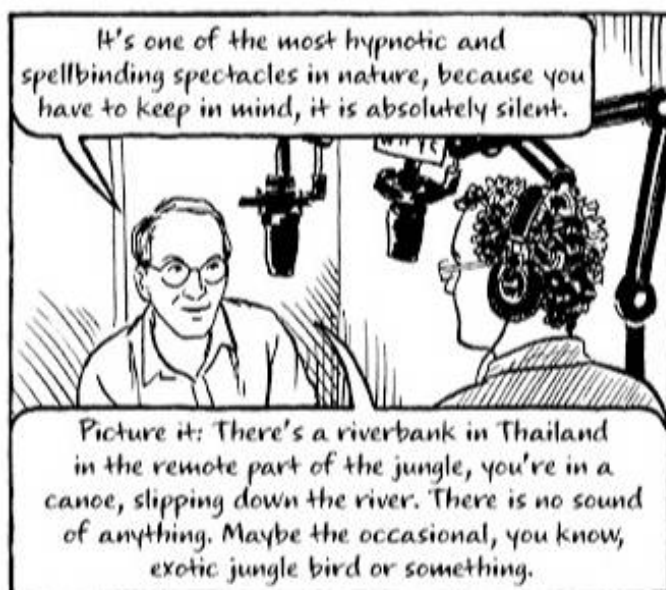
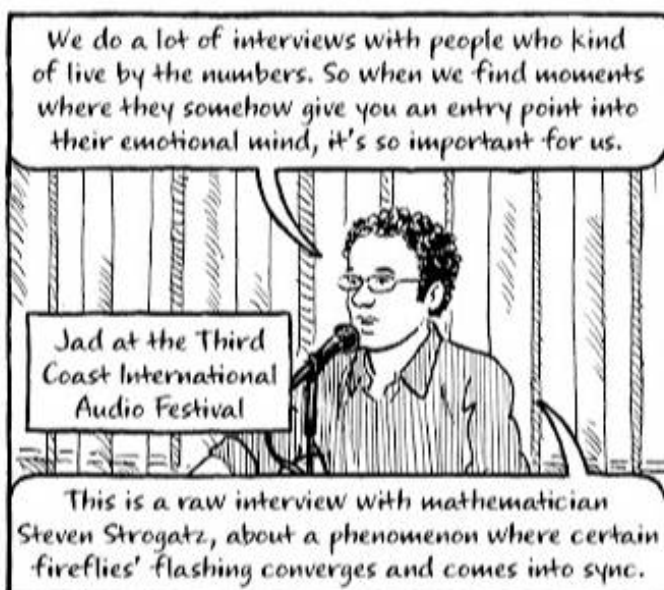
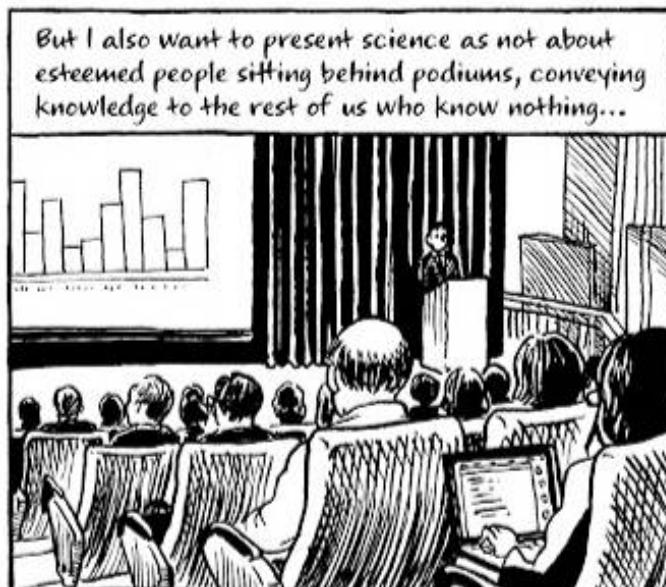
And she grabs a napkin and kind of curves it into a circle like a cell, and then she says...

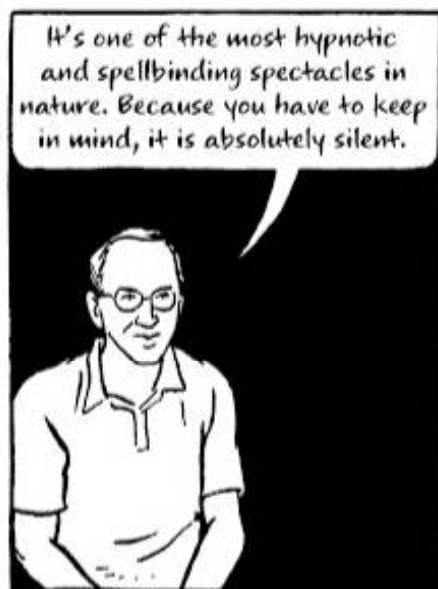
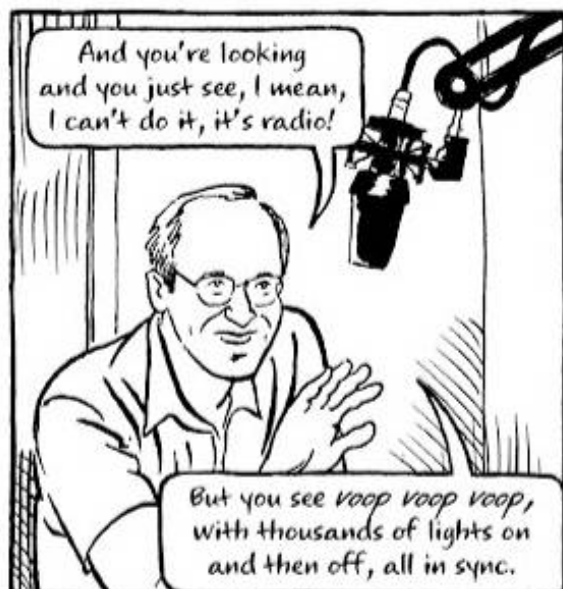


...and I don't know what the hell she's talking about. But what I get from her is excitement, a passion, a sense of mystery, of figuring something out about the universe.









Steve starts to see things, he sees flashing lights, and he has this wonderful rhythmic sound that he makes; he's almost hearing things.



He was feeling a sort of awe. We're always chasing the moment of awe, where the scientist goes out of the empirical mode of thinking and becomes like a child, looking at fireflies.



That moment of tape of Steve was a moment when you were in his head, you were in his emotional mind. You were: Oh yeah, he's feeling it...



I'm feeling it because he's feeling it. And you are in there, and the distance has been obliterated.



That's always the moment that you want.



And you develop this very very keen sense in an interview for, whoa, there it is. I feel that vibration, which is the vibration of being close.



I'm close now, I'm close. Go in. I don't know what I'm curious about, but stay here, don't move on.





There are other methods for creating emotional moments... more embarrassing methods...



If you go in and say, I'm from National Public Radio, I have these important questions, they will say, Yes, I have this important answer.

And a lot of the sound of NPR right now is because of that dynamic.



Whereas, I want story tape, funny tape, emotional tape. And I believe to get that tape you have to act that way.



We're just back from a reporting trip to Europe. There are a lot of times where I make a joke, and one person called me an idiot, and another person...What did he say?



That's nasty.

Ha ha ha! Robert would make these jokes, and they have to get translated...

I will make a lot of horrible dumb jokes. So dumb that the people I'm interviewing will say, I can tell better jokes than that. Now, I cut out my jokes, because they're embarrassing. And either I'm really lucky or this technique is working.



This doesn't work only with humor. You decide what someone's role is in the story. You want a professor to have a grand theory? Then I will try out theories on him.



$$Thm = \frac{10}{10}$$
$$W.L.$$
$$N.L.$$

What you're doing is modeling big-picture behavior for them. And they will eventually do the role that you are demonstrating for them.

Yes, and the great thing is that they will do it better. That's why we go to them as experts. But if you don't model something for them then they just want to sound like the rest of NPR.



I think that once they see I'm an idiot, the pressure is off.

In some situations, it's possible to take a page from performance art forms to get more emotional tape.

Before radio I was a theater director, experimental theater.

It was all about connecting to your core as a human being, like an animal, even.



I would take some of those experimental theater techniques, reduce, dilute them, and try them over the phone with well-known people.



Sometimes it's just "Stand up, close your eyes, whisper, shout"...it depends on what they need to do to change their own mode.

You get used to talking in a certain way. If you can jar someone out of that, they are unsteady, at risk, more open. They find themselves talking in an unmoderated way.

...but to a mind.



What you listen to is not to a voice...

...



...but to a mind.

The trick is to get the mind and heart synchronized with the voice. To hear at the center of a person. I have heard it happen while directing people. Their whole body became the words.



Getting a performance out of somebody, it's really fun. That's the cool part.

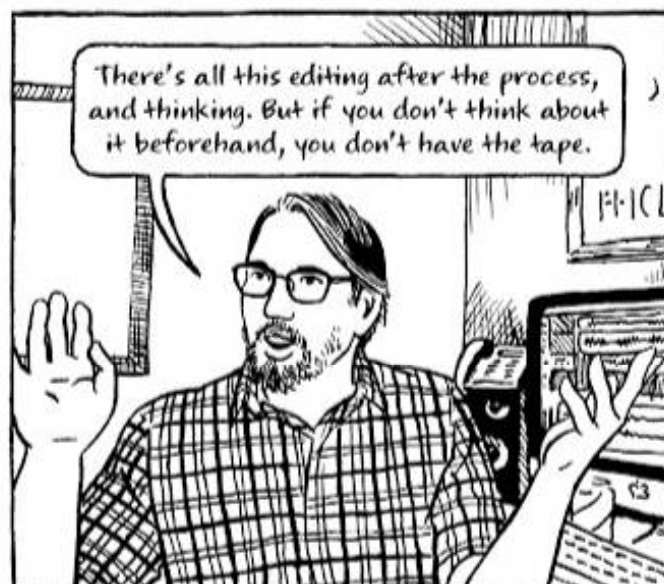
Mark Ristich,  
*Snap Judgment*



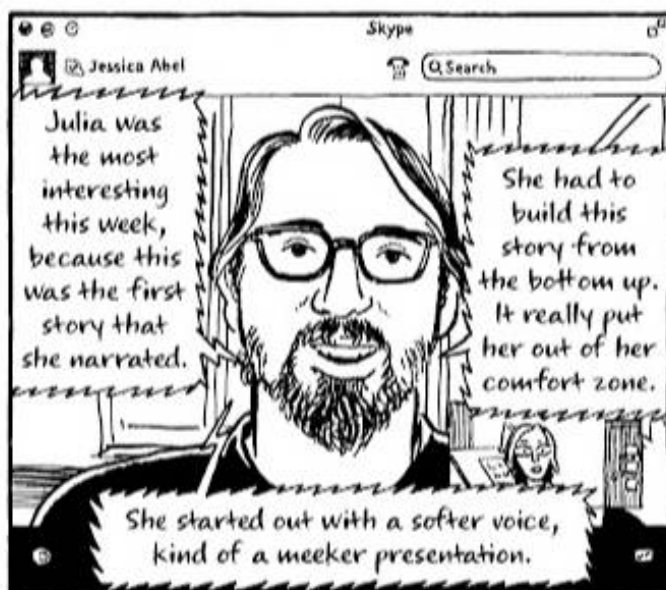
So Doc gives him one more option, just because he's a nice guy.

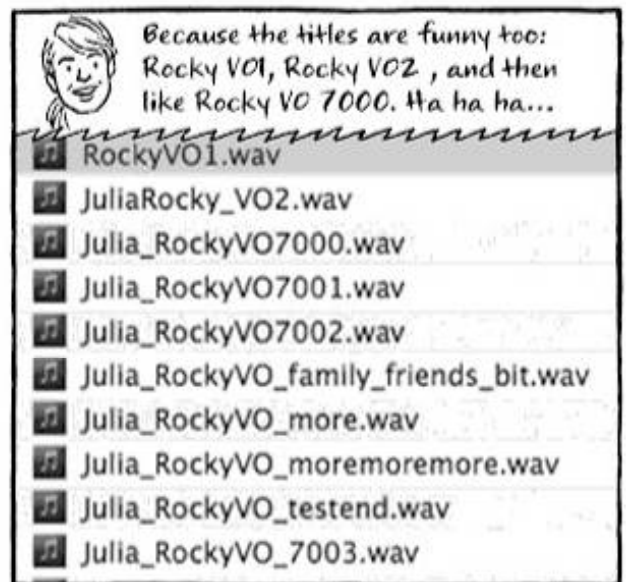
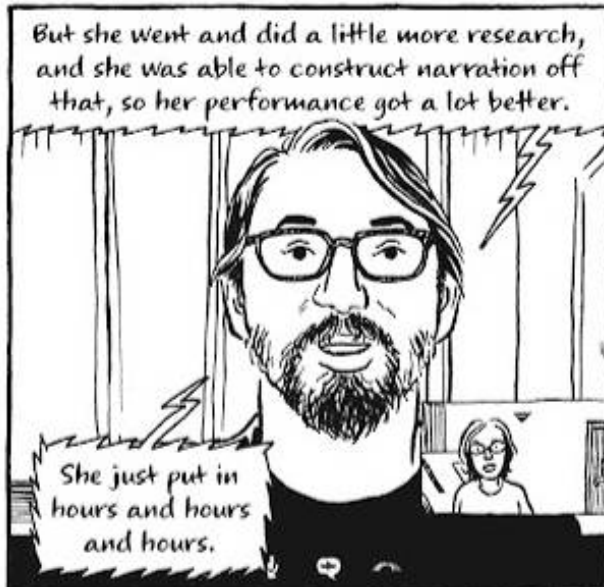


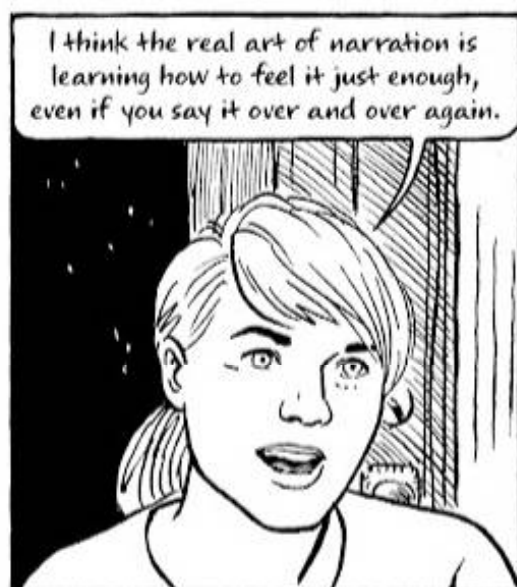
Mark directs *Snap* producer Jamie DeWolf, recording his narration on "Razzle Dazzle."





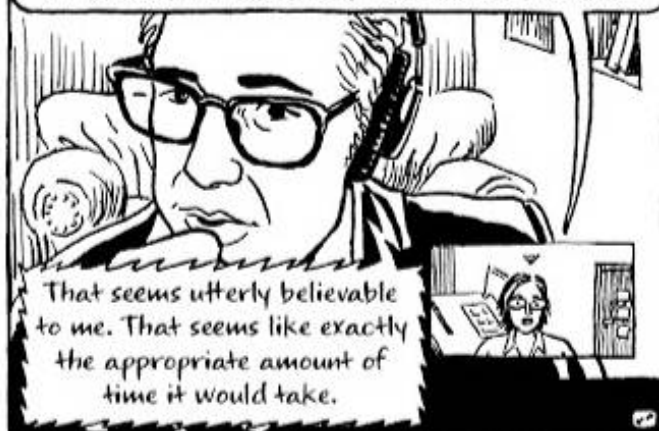








Julia DeWitt was doing her first narrated story when I was at *Snap*. And she spent four days trying to do a six-and-a-half minute story. Trying to narrate it in some way that sounded natural.



But why should it take four days to learn to be yourself even a little bit?



When I was learning to do it, I would do take and retake and retake, and then I would edit it to death to get it to sound natural. And there would be a million edits in a paragraph to get the thing to sound natural.



Even though you're playing the easiest part a person could ever play, which is yourself...

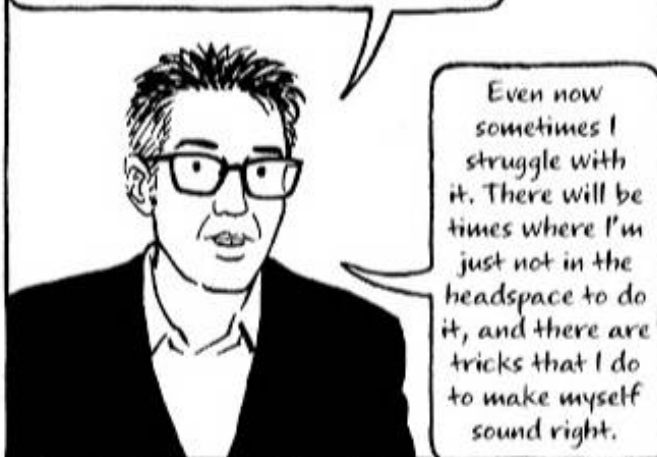
Ha ha!

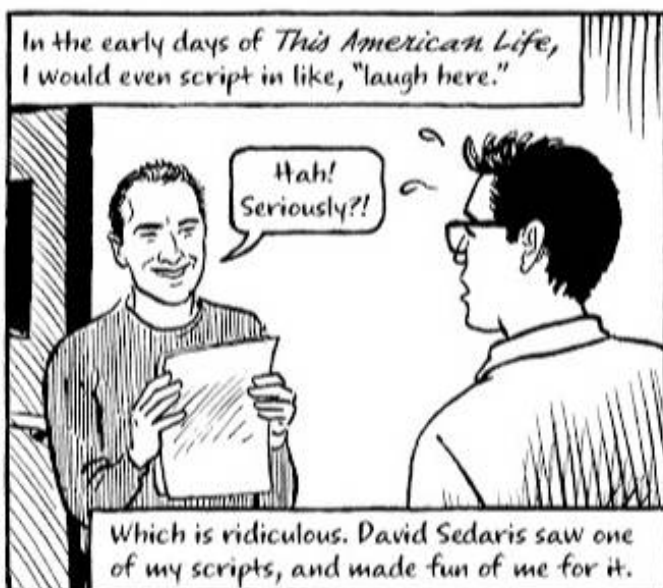
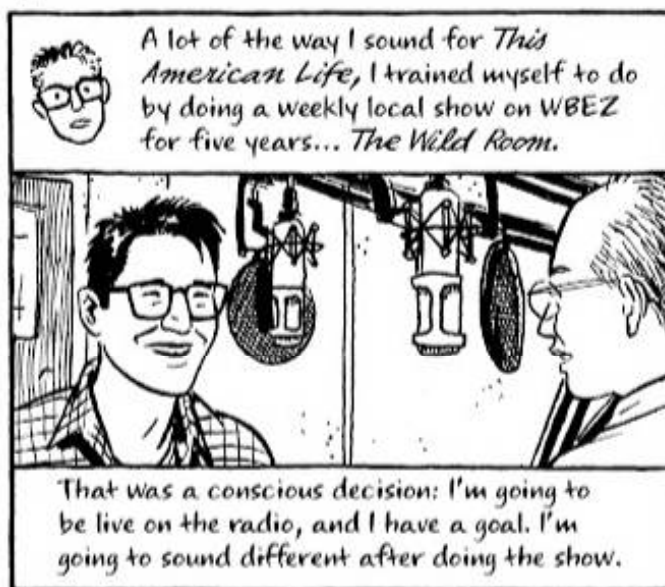
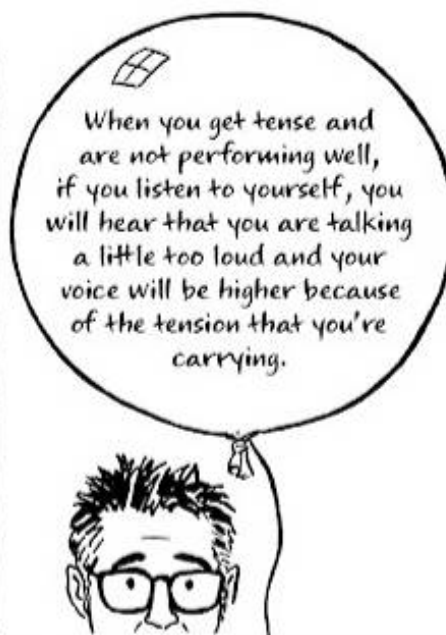
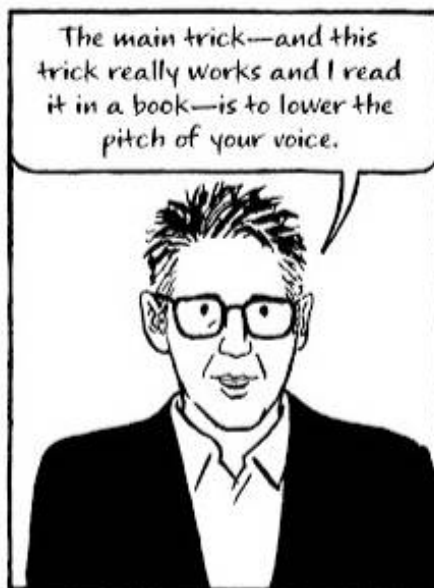


It's not like you're having to play a big range of feelings and emotions. It's a very easy part that you've been cast in.



But to sound like an actual person saying those words, and not somebody reading a page, that's a craft.





One of the keys to coming across as a real person on the radio is feeling your own enthusiasm, and not shutting it off.

I'm like a design columnist for the radio. My show is fact-based, but it's totally from my point of view, and I encourage that.

Roman Mars,  
99% Invisible

When pitching me, more traditional reporters will tell me all the reasons why they're excited about an idea, and then when they send me their stories, all that enthusiasm will be drained away.

All I do is interview them to get that back in there.

Or they say something like, Oh, I really hate this building. I am just like, Say that!



On my end, I keep the tape open, and I record myself spontaneously reacting to the things they say, so that it has that Robert and Jad quality, but it's only one person.

And all the things you say to yourself when you're sitting there editing something, the things you repeat, the things that you have fun with—it took me ten years to trust myself to do this—I now just say those things out loud, and put them on the radio.

...I have to break in here to say that this is where a normal public radio show would play the song "Hotel California," but I am your friend and I would never do that to you.



That's a little bit of making the listener the other person in a dialogue.

In some ways, it's more intimate.

Roman has run several of the most successful radio Kickstarter campaigns ever. He's got a rabid fan base. The intimacy and honesty of his approach plays a big part in that relationship.

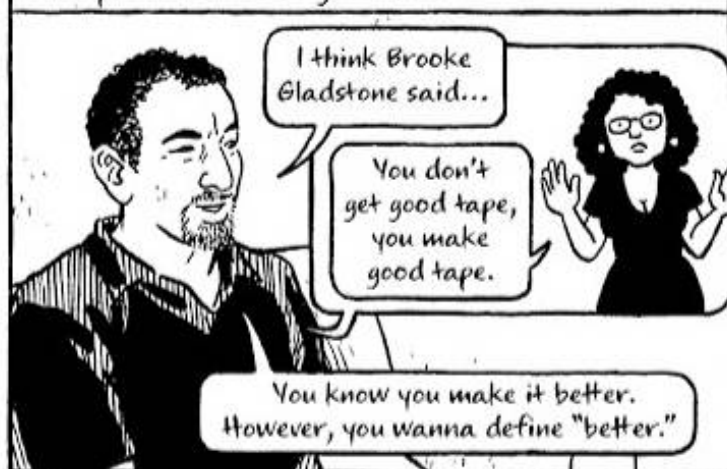
I'm definitely cultivating that. I think the success of this show is due to, when I ask people something, they feel like it's a favor, something you do for a friend. That's the way I built the show. That's the way I like it.





## TAKE A DEEP BREATH

Editing is at the heart of making stories. The maker must choose the moments that tell the story clearly and put them in the right order.



But how do you do that without losing the teller in the process?



One of the saddest experiences I had was when I had done a "This I Believe" essay, a lovely one, and I heard it on *Morning Edition*, and it sounded horrible. I couldn't figure out what had happened.



An editor had cut the breath sounds. He thought the person paused too long a couple of times. Or a bunch of times, really.

And it really almost broke my heart, because he had taken the actual living breathing human out of his own words.



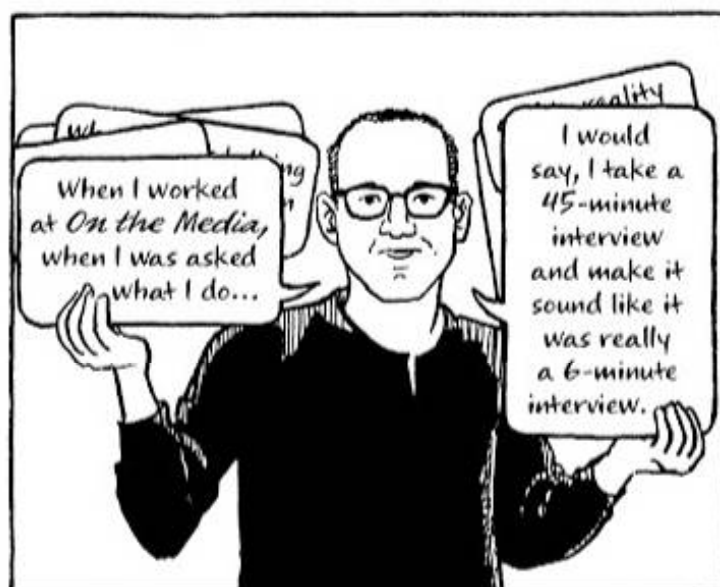
To sit still and be patient, and listen to a single voice for a long period of time, I think that's radical.



I mean, giving someone attention anymore, it's rare and precious. Because we don't. We don't take the time.



Dylan Keefe, technical director of *Radiolab*, instructed the troops on cleaning up heavily edited interviews.



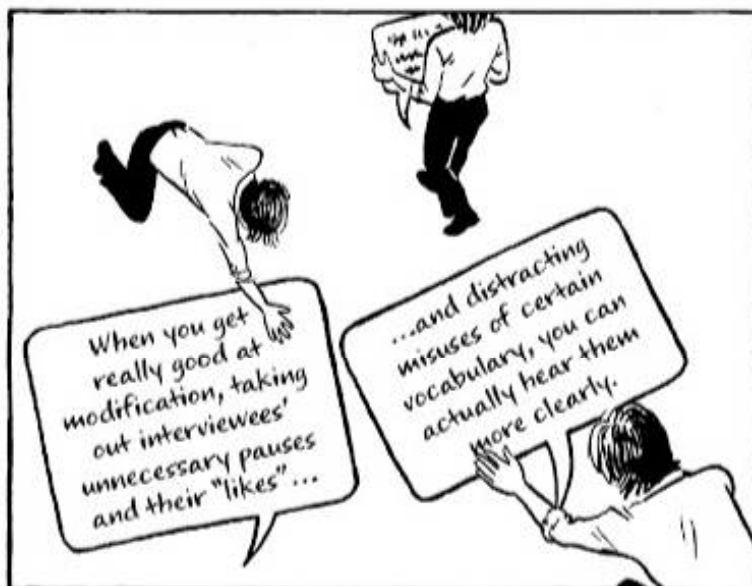
Before she came to *Snap*, Julia interned with the Kitchen Sisters, pioneering producers of intimate non-narrated stories. There, Julia got to witness the editing process up close for the first time.



Producers labor very hard to stay true to what interviewees *mean*, but do so while making a huge number of alterations to what they actually *say*.



What's been interesting coming to radio is that, over the course of being with the Kitchen Sisters, I realized that they will construct sentences that...were only partially said.



You know, when you change the order of something because they didn't necessarily choose the most powerful way to say it?





KEEP OR KILL:

# Story Structure





Catherine Burns walked me through the process of pulling a story together out of anecdotes.

Your friend Faye Lane, the flight attendant, when you thought, There has to be a story here. Did you just interview her?

I sat down with her and asked her a million questions like, What are some of the funniest, craziest things that have ever happened to you?

Tell me some of the darkest things that have happened to you.

And it turned out there were parallels between those things, we got lucky.



One of the darkest things for her was being a flight attendant in the days after 9/11—



I saw a lot of really horrible things from the air.

...Lower Manhattan smoldering for weeks and weeks.

Catherine created a picture of the range of experiences of a flight attendant.



But then she talked about seeing the northern lights, seeing fireworks from above, all these beautiful things that you also see.

She had some really crazy stories.



I hit bottom one day when I had a passenger who had a heart attack on my flight. We had the pads of the defibrillator on him.



And a woman's pulling on her sleeve, and she finally turns around.

And she held up her coffee cup and said, "This coffee is cold."



It's insane.

...but a bunch of anecdotes aren't enough to make a powerful story. You need the person to undergo a change.



So I said, What was the change you experienced?

It was going from being so enthusiastic, to seeing how really hard it is.

That's not how you seem to feel about it now, you're almost maddeningly chipper when you talk about your job.

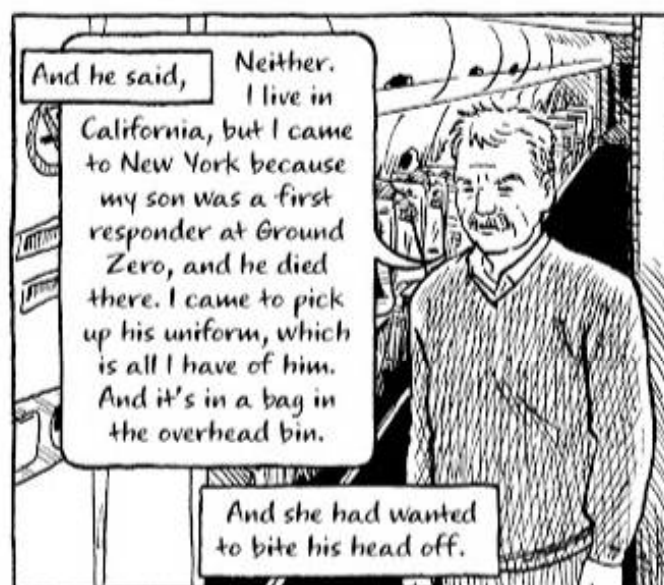


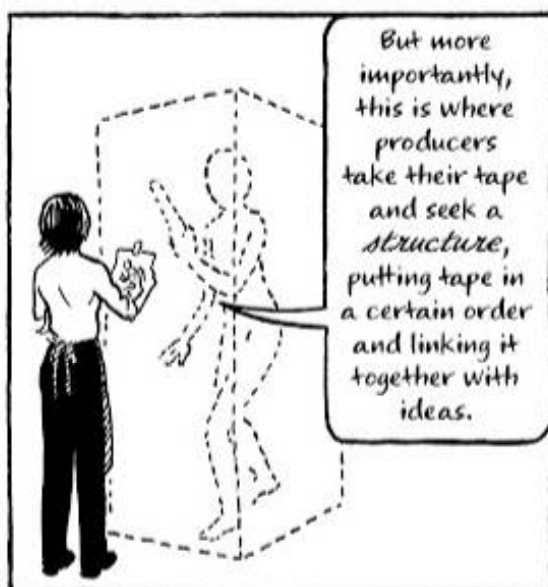
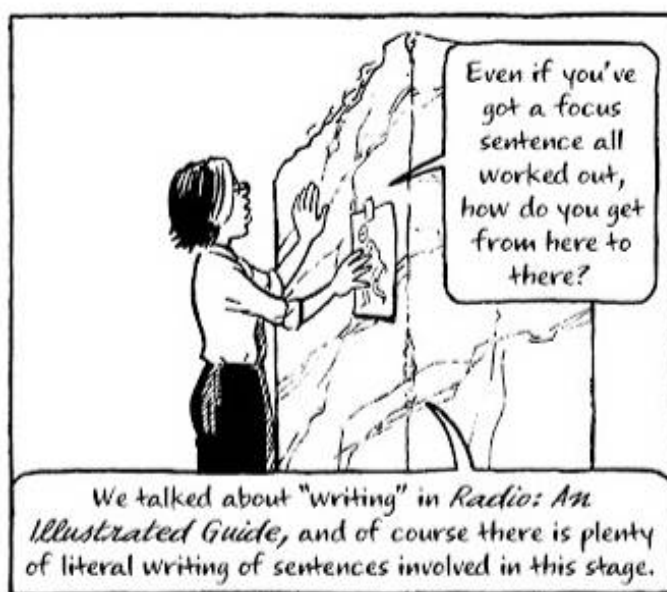
Well, there was this one day...

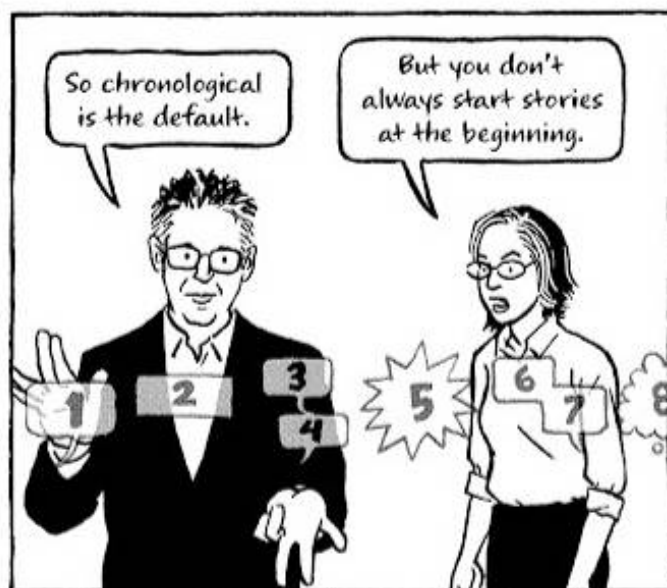


The pivot point of this story.











To be successful,  
you have to have  
interesting taste.



Chances are, if you're somebody who wants  
to make stories, the reason is because you love  
stories, and you probably *do* have interesting taste.

That's kind of  
what's getting you  
into the game.



So, "taste." You pay close attention  
to what you really like, and pick  
your favorite moments. Then what?

A really common thing for me  
is I'll write a version which has  
all my favorite moments in it.



And if I can't decide between beginning A  
and beginning B, or ending A and ending B,  
rather than dither about it, I'll just write both.



And then I'll read both versions to  
somebody. Or to a bunch of people.  
And generally you get instant feedback  
that lets you know what you think.

You mean you  
do an edit.

We'll get back to edits in a bit.

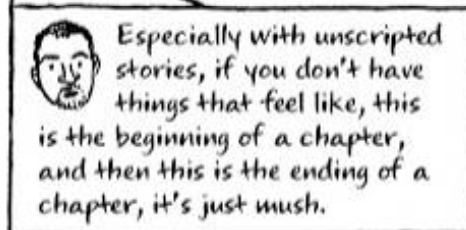
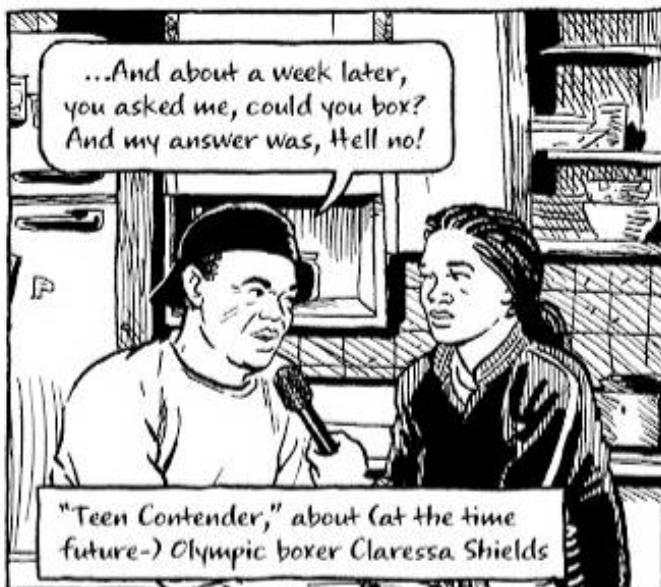


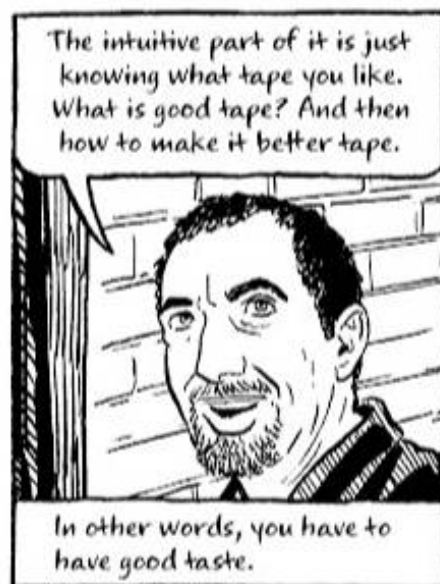
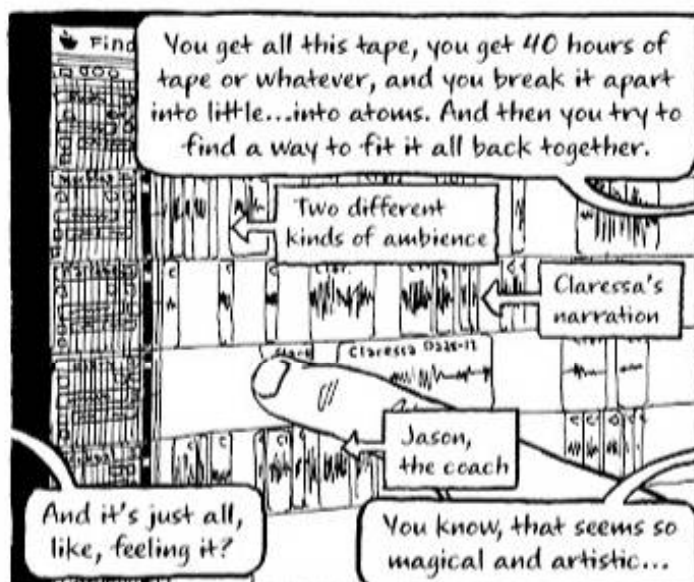
Right.

You don't have to agree with them. You  
just want to think about what they say.



## BUILDING BLOCKS







At the Transom Workshop, Rob Rosenthal walked Lauren Ober through how a sketched-out scene structure would help her break up a long stretch of information in a story about the mother of a kid with Prader-Willi syndrome, a genetic disease whose most obvious symptom is uncontrollable hunger.



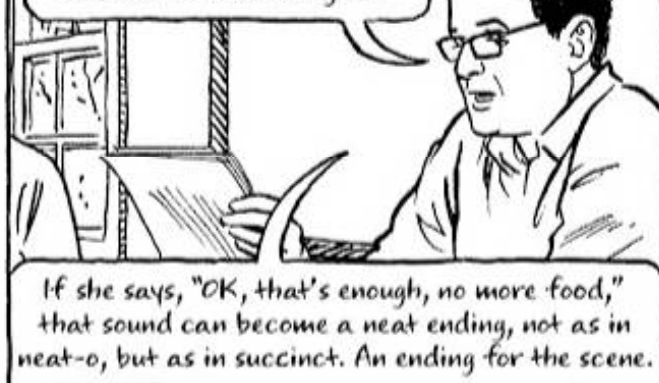
But it doesn't always work that way. A scene can start, you know, and it just sort of fades away and she starts talking about stuff and a new scene starts.



Lauren had placed her characters in a breakfast setting with a piece of tape, but moved on quickly.



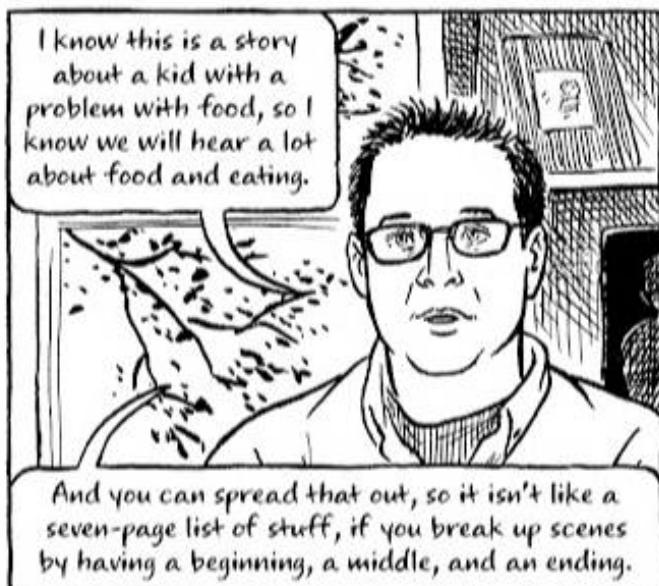
The first seven pages of your script comes across as a list of the food issues he has, of which there are a gazillion. So what I'm wondering is...



Because we go into breakfast on the third page, but we don't come out of breakfast? Is that what you're saying?



I know this is a story about a kid with a problem with food, so I know we will hear a lot about food and eating.



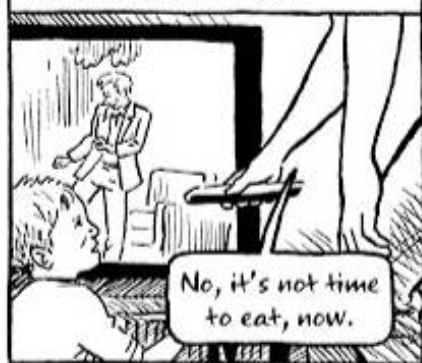
"OK, Connor, ready for some breakfast?" And then she gets out the strawberries, and we hear eating in the background, then she starts talking about the issue.



"Finish up what's on your plate," or whatever she says, that happens in the middle. Some little middle thing pops up. So that breakfast is continuing on.



So okay, we're done with breakfast. The sound fades out, and now she can just talk to us, and we're nowhere. Then lunch comes up. Do you have lunch with them?



Yeah. I mean, I had lunch and snack. Some of it's not that compelling, soundwise.



Do you want some peanut butter and jelly today? Yeah?



In this case, the scenes themselves are not the point. They serve as a kind of punctuation, like paragraphs, for the story.



As soon as she says, "Do you want peanut butter and jelly?" That says lunch to me. You don't need her in interview tape saying, "And in the middle of the day, we have lunch."

In between—you are going to like this pun—a bunch of info is sandwiched in there.



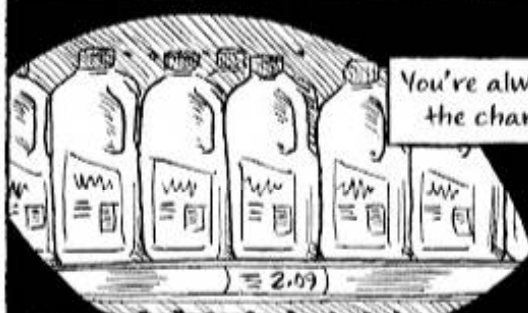
One of the issues for a show like *Radiolab* is that the producers may find themselves with a lot of ideas to convey, and very little chronological *story* to "sandwich" it between.



Soren Wheeler

If there's any action, information and exposition should always be embedded inside the action.

But what works better is, he's going to the store, and he reaches for the milk, *because*, earlier, he had this thought... That way, the listener gets the information just when they need it.



You're always with the character.

You are right here, and hopefully *inside*.



Your first instinct may be to set things up with some information, then go to action, maybe because chronologically that's how it happened.

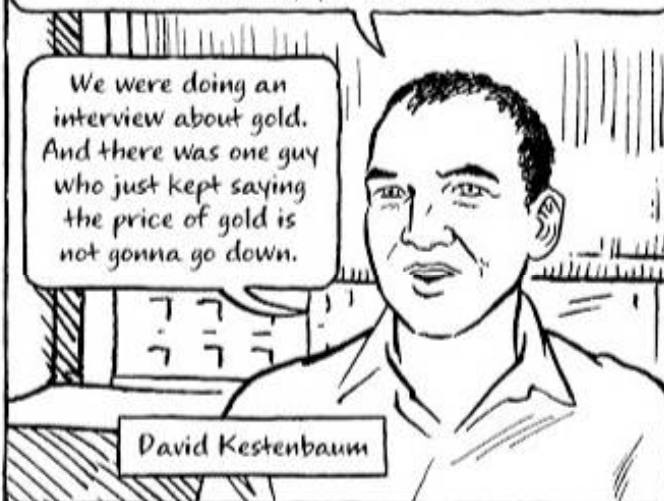


A guy had some thought and then went to the store. He bought some milk and then...



I've always believed very very strongly in scenes; if there isn't one, you have to make one.

We were doing an interview about gold. And there was one guy who just kept saying the price of gold is not gonna go down.



David Kestenbaum

Do you ever worry that the world will go, This is crazy, I'm going to go buy food or something instead. And then it goes down to like \$10 for this coin instead of \$400?



Well, it's not. I can tell you right now, I'm going to look at my Blackberry.



Rob Rosenthal says that a scene is a setting, an action, and an idea.



And that's not a scene, he's just a guy in a studio in Connecticut. But because he's getting out his phone, and he's checking it and he's like, "Oh, oh, it's up again," now something is happening. And that's a scene.



It's gone up dramatically in the last few minutes, to \$1367.

But sometimes just an action and an idea is enough.



For a scene to work, you need to create a vivid image in the listener's imagination. This does not necessarily mean you have to have ambient sound.



Caitlin Kenney did a story about how they keep the federal jobs numbers secret. She had somebody saying...



The reporters have to put all of their belongings in a locker.

That's a passive way of saying it.



The reporters arrive at 8 AM.

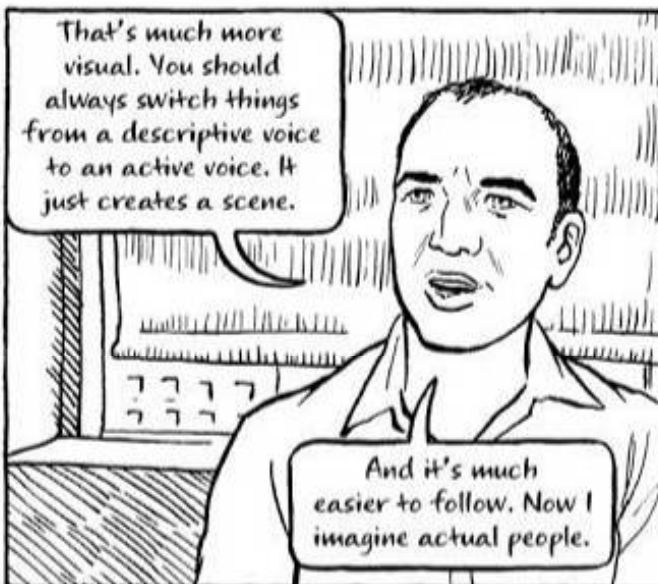
They go through security.

Then they get lockers.

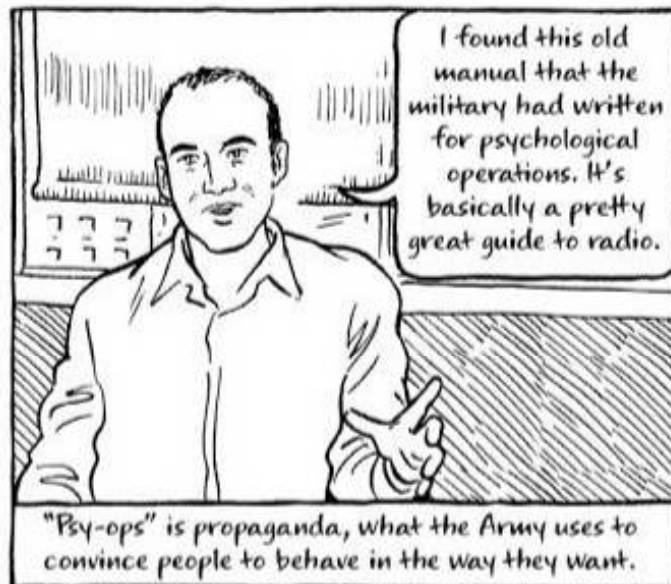
They put all their personal belongings in the lockers.

They lock the lockers.

That's much more visual. You should always switch things from a descriptive voice to an active voice. It just creates a scene.



And it's much easier to follow. Now I imagine actual people.



I found this old manual that the military had written for psychological operations. It's basically a pretty great guide to radio.

"Psy-ops" is propaganda, what the Army uses to convince people to behave in the way they want.

It says this about writing scripts: "Power of suggestion. The mind of each listener is a vast storehouse of scenery. The radio writer, through speech, music, and other sounds, enables the listener to visualize each scene."

## PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS

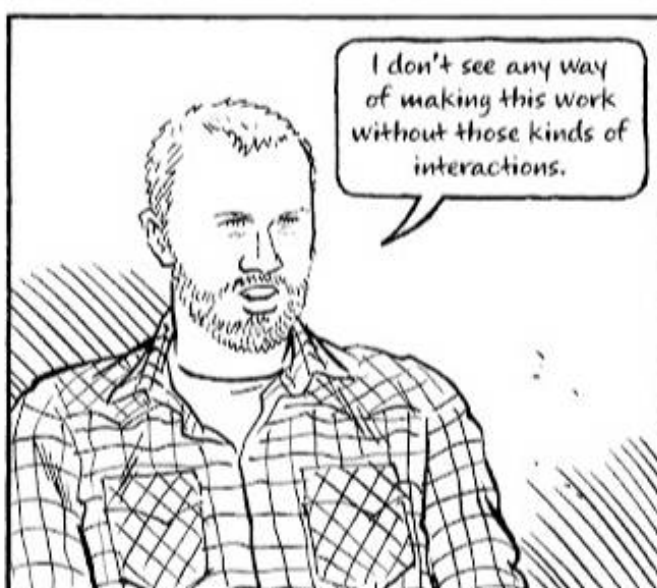
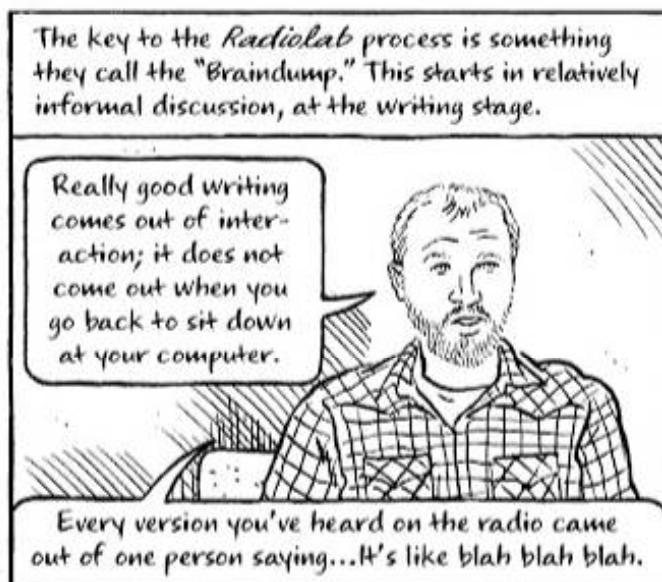
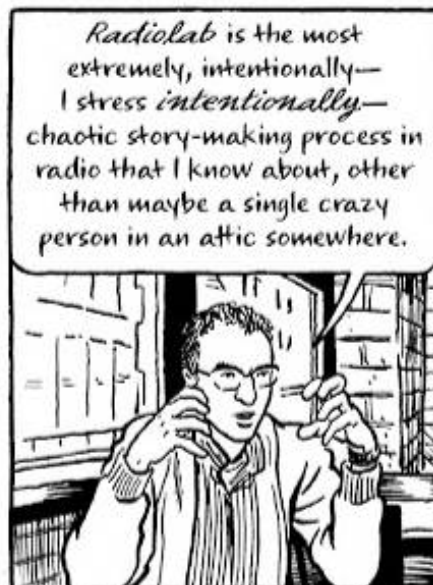
FM 33-1



The scenery people create in their heads is much more vivid than anything you could take a photo of.

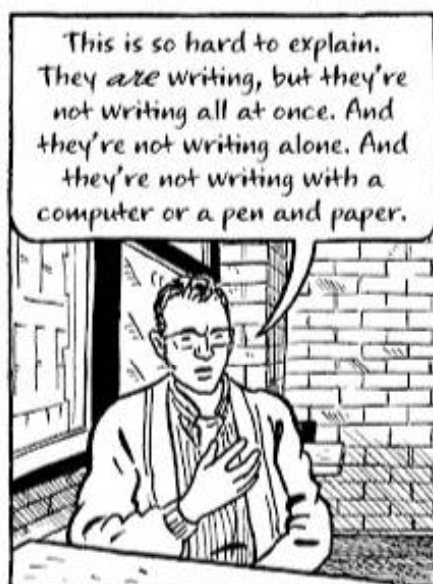


## WRITING IN THE SPACE BETWEEN TWO PEOPLE









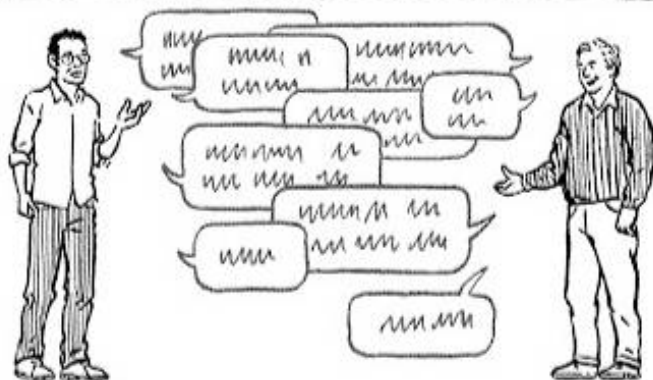
\* Tracking: recording narration (i.e., laying down a track)





If you think about it, what they're doing is the logical conclusion of what a certain style of radio production should be. You want it to sound natural. You want to not have to worry about your performance.

If you want it to sound like spoken language, well, why even go through the step of doing it as written language and then having to pretend in this fake way that you're just saying it?



I mean, the disadvantage is that when you want to make a change, you have to go in and record yourself in a way that will match your earlier recording.



And fortunately, both Jad and Robert are big fakers and good performers and so they can go back in and they can re-create the tone of voice they had that day when they were feeling really funny on a day when they're not feeling really funny and just do a pickup, to restate something more concisely.

There's a trick to that, too.



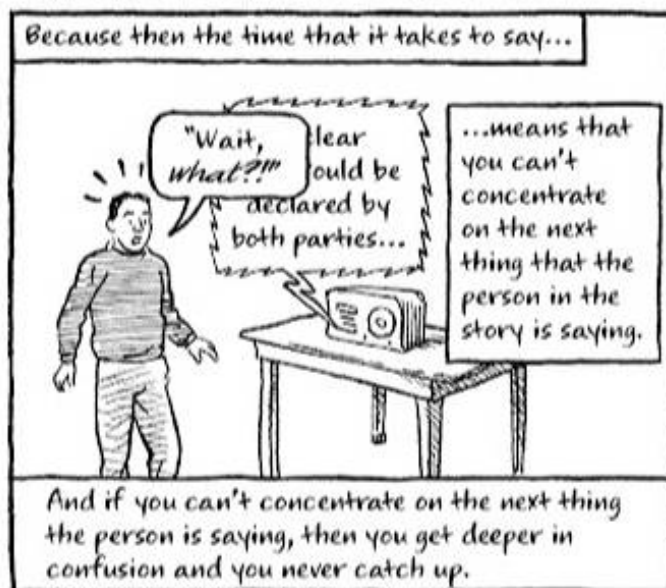
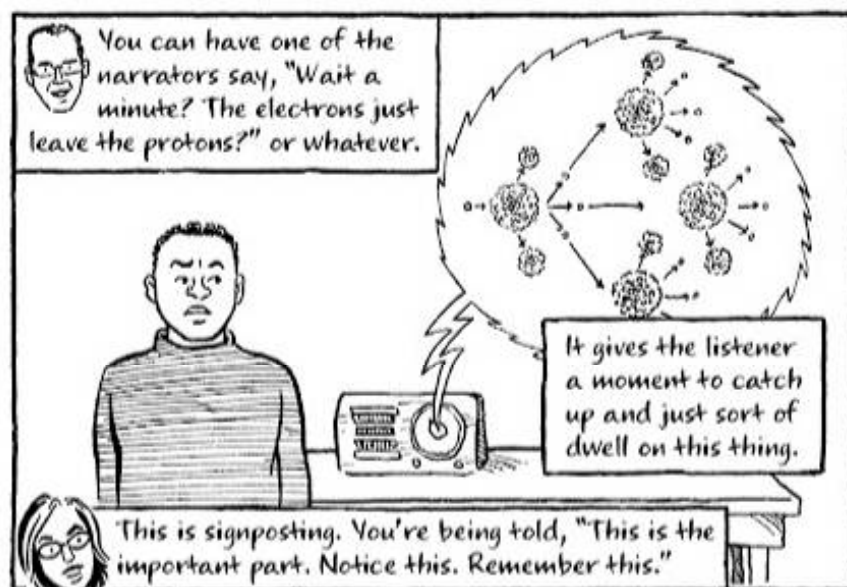
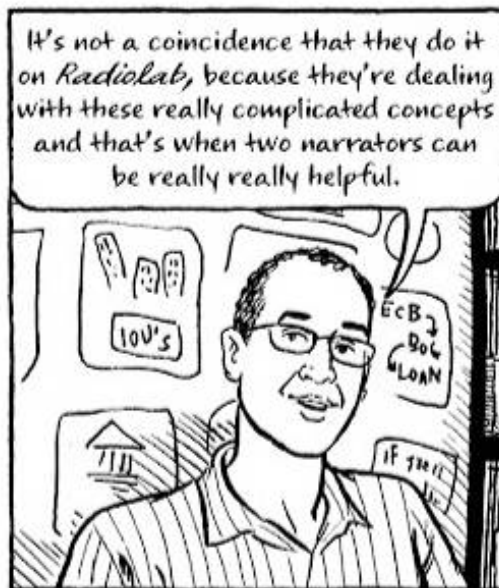
But maybe that's an easier trick to master for some people.



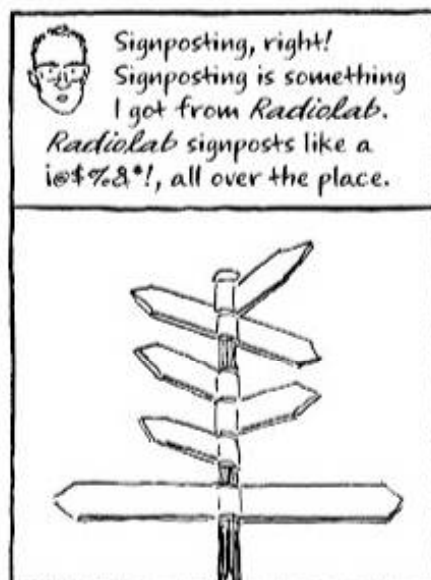
Yeah.



# WAIT, WHAT?



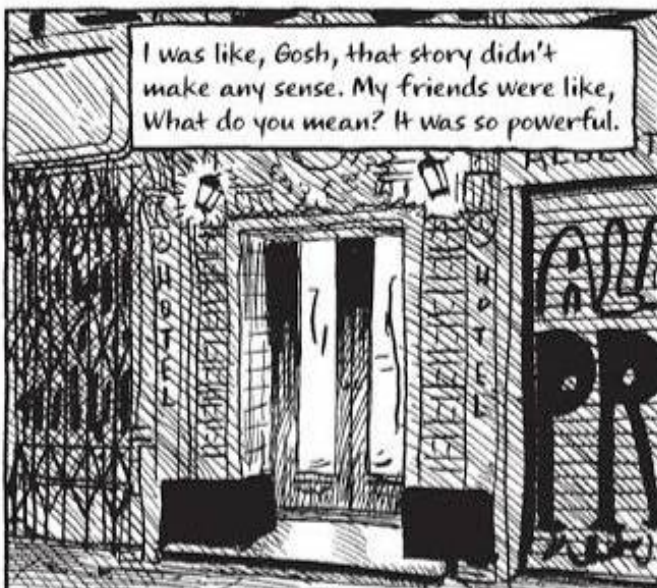






There was a slam one night, somehow I got distracted for literally five seconds. And I looked up, and had no idea what was going on for the entire rest of the story.

Artie and I knew where a lot of Dad's kind of just weird, aberrant presents came from.



I was like, Gosh, that story didn't make any sense. My friends were like, What do you mean? It was so powerful.

They came to us indirectly from the the guys who lived in the single men's rooming house where he moved after he divorced. He worked as a super there.



What I had missed was...



"...and he'd open it up, and somebody would be in there. Dead."

He'd come back downstairs with a pillowcase full of stuff that wound up eventually under our Christmas tree.



But he said it in like two seconds. There wasn't much reflection around this dead body.

And I had no idea what was happening for the next four minutes.



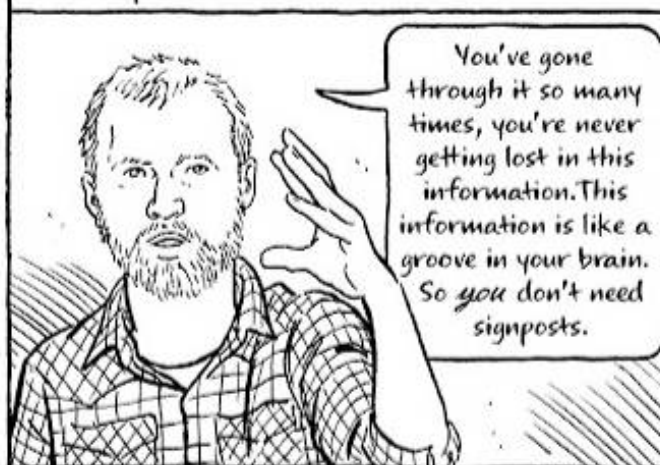
"So it turns out the old book from the old apartment was an 1863 edition of Gustave Doré's illustrated masterpiece, *Dante's Divine Comedy*, a first impression with plates. It's worth thousands of dollars."

And I thought, Wow, I have to be aware of this as a director. If you need to know about the dead body for the whole rest of the story, you better make sure that everybody in the audience realizes there's a dead body.





Signposts are crucial. But they're one of the hardest parts of the story to write without the help of an editor.



The moment when the listeners are sitting in the middle of the big landscape of information and they've lost their way, is the moment where you as a storyteller have failed.



And sometimes it's as simple as saying, OK, look, this is going to get a little bit tricky, but just stay with me. It's going to take three steps. But it will be worth it.



My own philosophy on storytelling is that people don't want to be told how to feel but they do want to be told what to pay attention to.

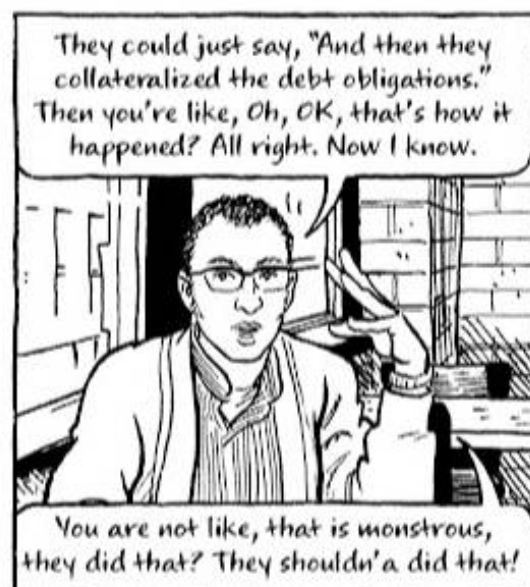
Right before something happens, drop in a little phrase like, "and that's the moment when everything changed..." or "and that's when things got interesting."



Signposting can take all kinds of forms.







## REFLECTING



I need to ask you about the idea of reflections.



Because, as I'm sure you know, Glynn Washington has objections to this whole concept.

This is the question of taste. Glynn can disagree. But to my taste, it's more interesting if somebody has a thought about the story, and it helps justify the existence of the story.



Through the interview process lots of different things can emerge, but generally, instead of ending on reflection, we want to have them end on action.



Because what they actually do is more powerful, important, indicative of their mental state than anything they say about it.

When I'm mapping out my plan for an interview, I will map out what I think the plot of the story is, but I also know the points where I really want to know, like, what did they feel?



There are moments where it's utterly clear how the characters feel. Sometimes that can be expressed through action and what they say and how they react to things, but sometimes you really have to just say it.



Sometimes there isn't an action.

Ideally, the person's feelings are expressed through action and dialogue.

Every writing teacher will say, "Show, don't tell."



But you don't always have that luxury in documentary work.



It's tricky, because you don't want every story to come across as an after-school special. Life is not wrapped up in a nice neat bow at the end. So sometimes the stories end in a question.



Things don't have to be 100% neatly resolved, but the audience has to feel that there's at least some measure of resolution to it, because otherwise, why are they listening?



Catherine is talking about giving the story stakes. It needs to matter, and we need to know why.

And to some degree, people do need to say it out loud. They can say it in a subtle way. And I think saying it in a subtle way can be really nice. It can feel more authentic.

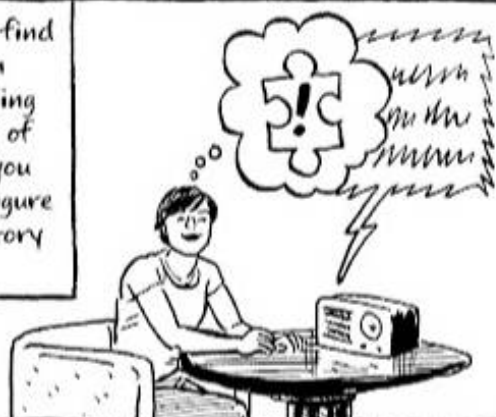


That process, when the listener says, Ugh! Oh I get it, or I don't get it—that is, that's the essence, that's the soul of the story. I don't want to screw that magic gap up.



But Glynn feels that the stakes need to be understood by the listener without interference.

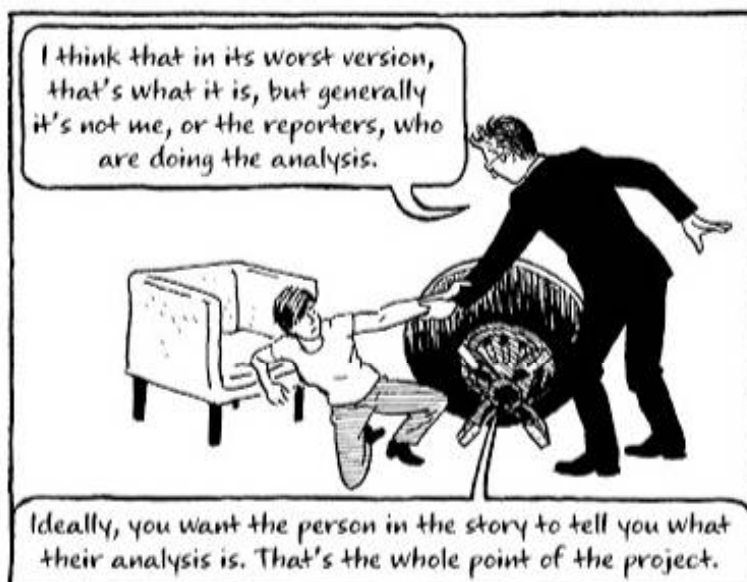
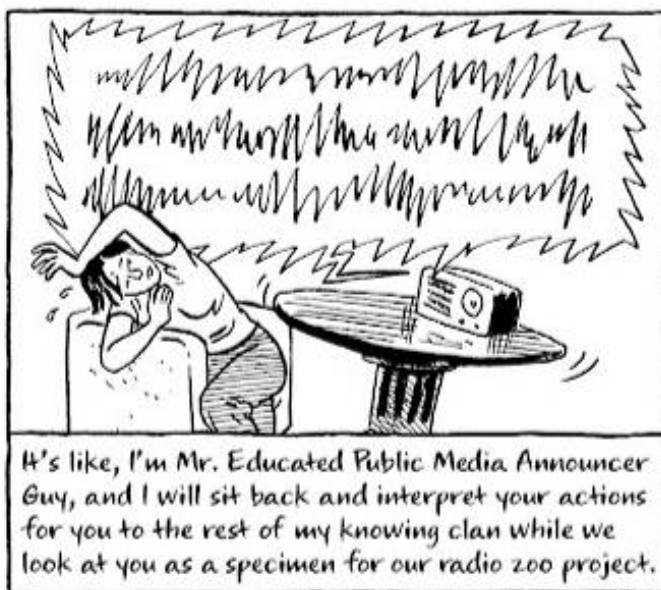
Where I find magic in storytelling is near the end of a story, when you are trying to figure out what the story means.



And if I come to you and I tell you that a story means this or a story means that, in that final little gap, I have robbed you of the ability to make the story your own, to take exactly what you think out of it.



And, when you come out of a story and you start reflecting upon it, it's kind of a wink to the audience, we're all here together.



## RULES? THERE ARE NO STINKIN' RULES.

At this point we seem to have gone over most of the rules. So it should be pretty easy to just plug things in to make a story, right?



TOPIC = X  
INTERESTING = Y  
X + Y  
= STORY

I call the things I teach "rules" and I believe in them wholeheartedly, but in the end, it's really just a theory of journalism.

If someone comes up with another theory, and that theory produces good radio, all the better.



POOF!

This is very mysterious stuff. I sometimes think it's almost dangerous to deconstruct too much.

Robert Krulwich



I'm reminded of a "Talk of the Town" I once read in *The New Yorker* with Martin Scorsese. He was asked about his work in the editing room, what's it like?

And he answered, It reminds me of painting. As a painter, you put one color against another color, but you never know what the feeling will be until you try it. There's no intellectual reason or concept behind it. It just feels better.



So there's no way to relax when you're doing this stuff. There's no way to relax and say, 'At least, here we know.' You never know.

Structure is an improvisation, like arranging flowers in a bowl; at some point, for no apparent reason, one arrangement feels good. So you stop. And you say, "Done."



Why this particular configuration of flowers? I dunno. Why not some other order? I dunno. Why did you stop? 'Cause it felt complete, in balance.

Do you have an explicit set of rules?



It's utterly dynamic, which is why it's not boring. Because if there was only one set of rules, all stories would sound the same.



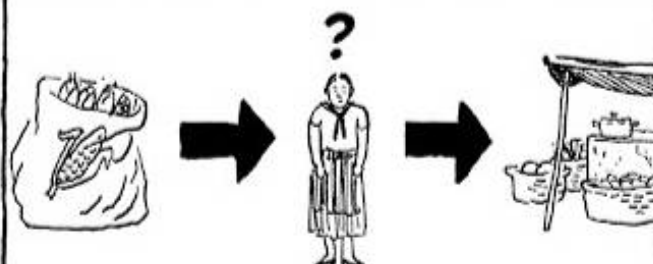


That's what's wrong with public relations. The story mold is exactly identical each time. This NGO I visited called it:

"Maria makes tortillas."



You know, Maria is making tortillas by herself, but she has trouble getting the corn, and she can't find a market to sell them.



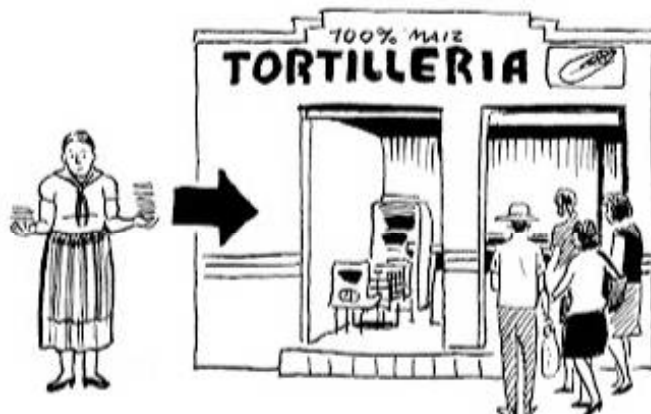
But the NGO figures out how to get corn to Maria and how to connect Maria with...and then the camera pulls back—and now Maria needs to hire others, which...

This story is told over and over and over again.

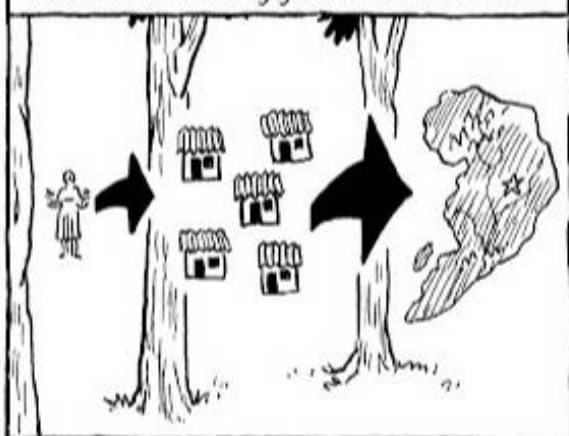


I mean, the U.S. government has narrative guidelines which say, "Write your report in this form," and it is fundamentally similar to the one I just outlined.

You identify with the single person, understand their needs, and see how the aid is operating to better their life...



...and resonating outward to the village and then making the whole nation more prosperous and a better trading partner, and not a breeding ground for terrorism.



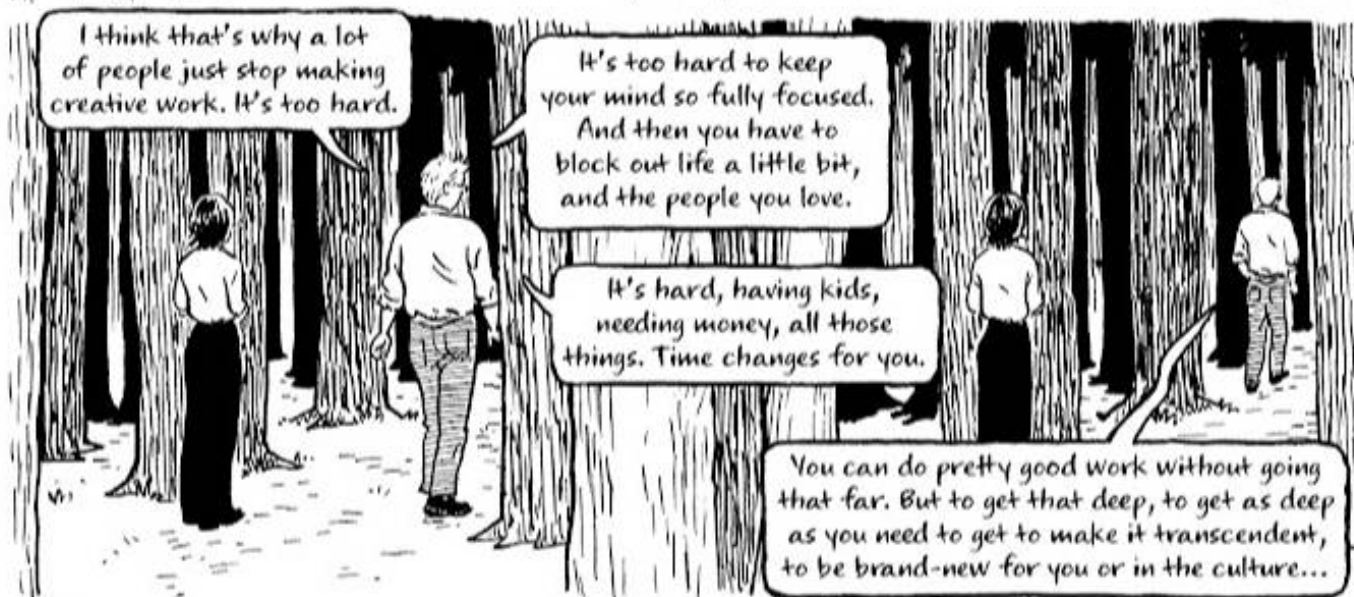
So, yes, there are rules for storytelling, and they are used so much that they're drab and uninteresting.

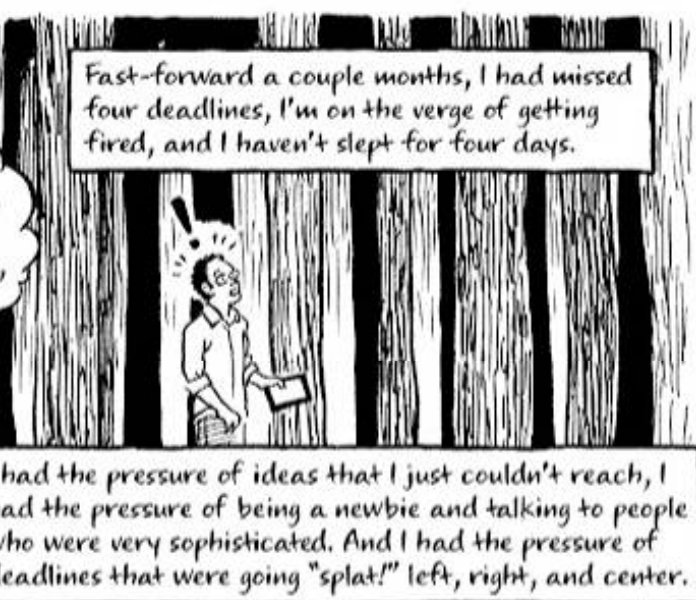
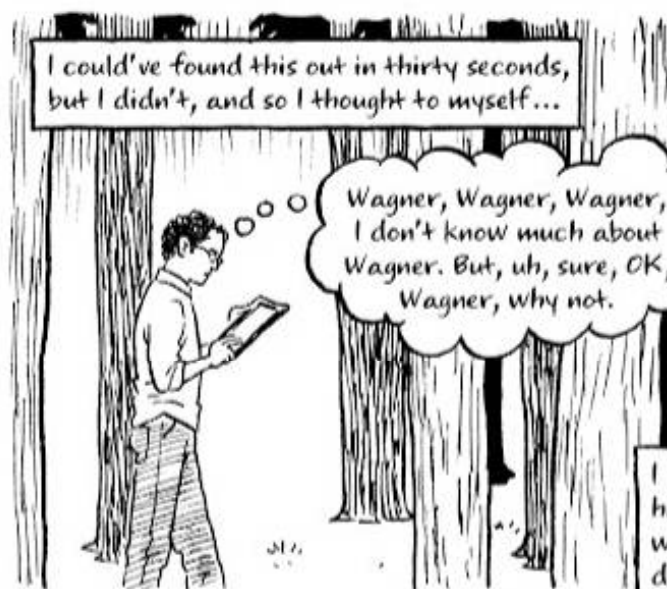
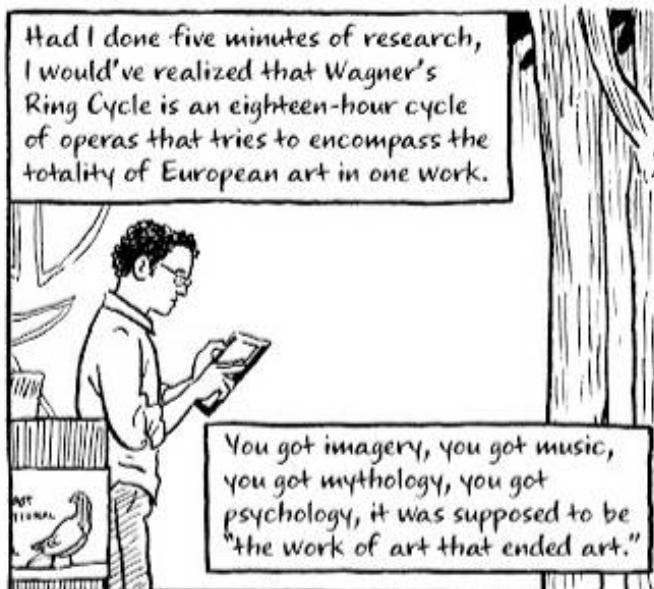


















Choices, so many choices.

Kierkegaard talked about it this way: A man stands on the edge of a cliff and looks down.

He fears he'll fall, but he also feels a terrifying urge to jump. This causes him anguish, stemming from the fact that he realizes he has absolute freedom to jump or not to jump.

So the man feels exhilaration but also an intense dread, what Kierkegaard called "the dizziness of freedom."

Freedom is a fundamental part of the process for creating these shows. And it's why they're so good.

Almost everything we do is self-generated.

That's right, there's no editor assigning you anything.

There's a tremendous amount of autonomy. And that, for me, is incredibly valuable.

Autonomy is also how you get yourself into the German forest.

It can be hard, you know. When I feel like I'm not doing great stuff, I'm like, if only I were more clever, if only I were a better person...I can only blame myself.

No one would give up that autonomy. That terrible and joyful freedom. It is transformative.

But here's the crucial point! When I heard the Wagner thing on the radio later, I was like...

Whoa, somewhere in the middle of that trauma, I think I found my voice.

...inside that flux, there is a center. You feel it. Millions of musical notes multiplying, making up the 18th-century organism ...

There's a real correlation between time spent in the German forest and these moments of emergence.

And to be clear, the German forest changes.

That sense of, the work is just too big to put my head around this, how am I gonna do this, that never changes.

But what does change is that the terror gets reframed for you, because now, you've made it out a few times.

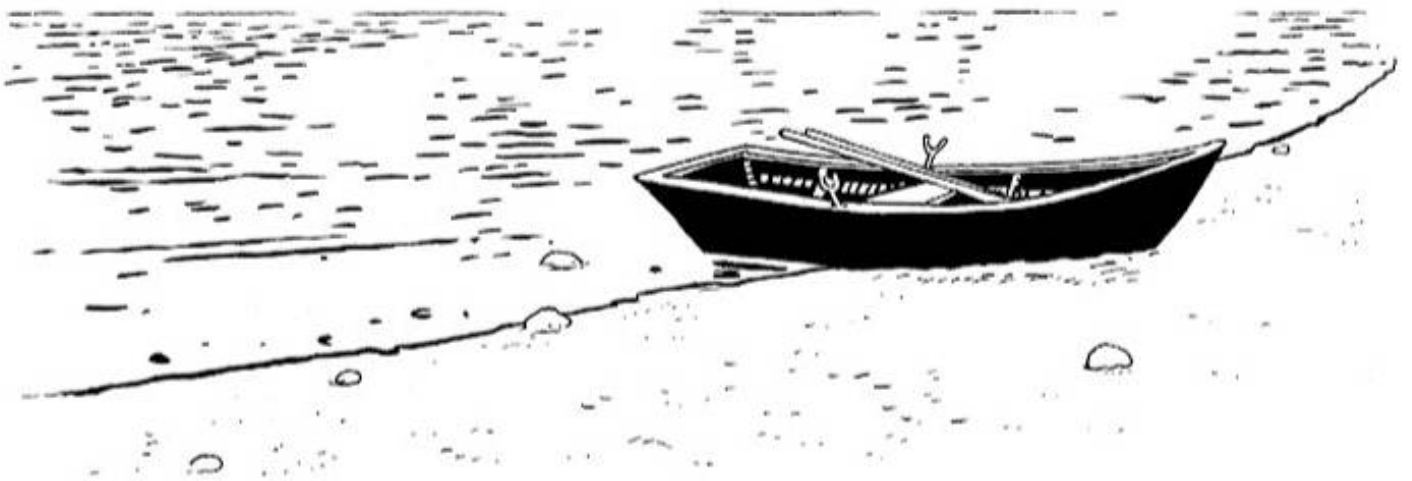
You can see over the treetops, and into the future, to where, there you are, you're still there, you're still alive.

So you begin to recognize the German forest for what it is. It's actually a tool. It's the place you have to go to hear the next version of yourself.

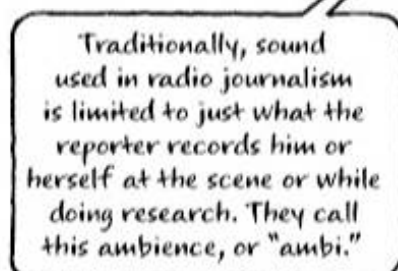
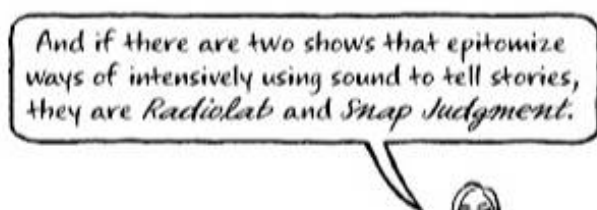
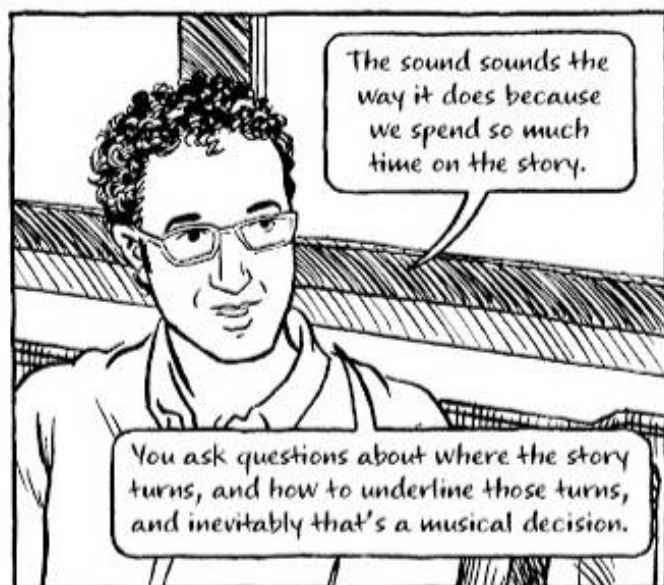


THE DEEP SEA:

# Sound









Pat Mesiti-Miller, the resident sound guru at *Slap*, walked me through how he uses sound to tell a story using "Night at the Rock Bar," which he produced with Mark Ristich.



The story is about a young guy named Chaim who's hanging out at a bar in Jerusalem when it comes under attack by gunmen. Pat set the scene with a city soundscape.



"Downtown Jerusalem is always bustling, lots of people there. Th..."

Here I have a recording of a crowd in downtown Israel.



How did you find that?

There are websites that sound recorders flock to, and post free sounds.

Freesound.org is one. Ha ha...

Ha ha. That's apropos.

Soundsnap is another one we use a lot.



Do the people who record the stuff get credited?

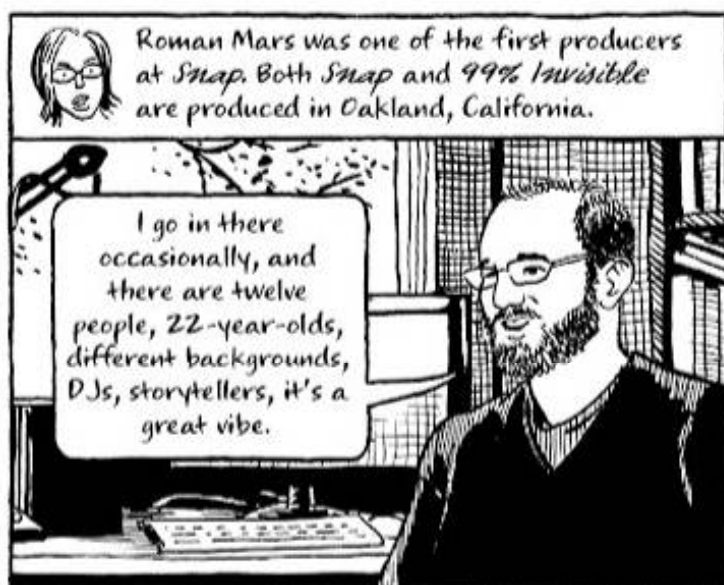
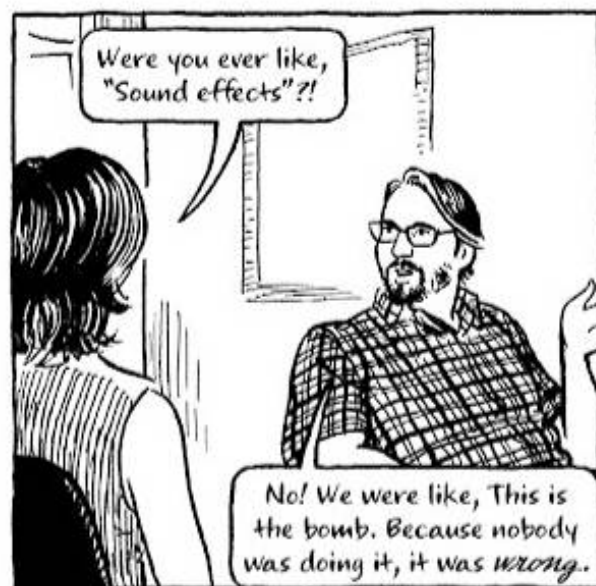
No, they'll post the sound with a Creative Commons license. Because we don't want to attribute a sound in the radio show. "That piece was produced by Mark Ristich and Pat Mesiti-Miller. With a car horn from Stinky 12-83..."

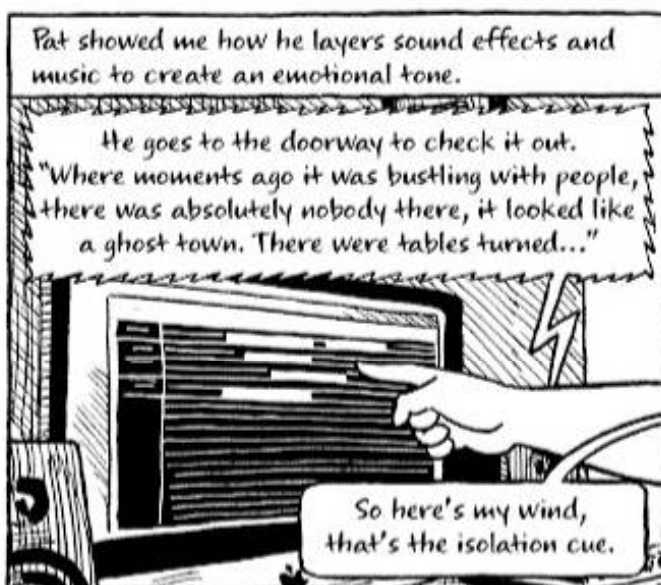
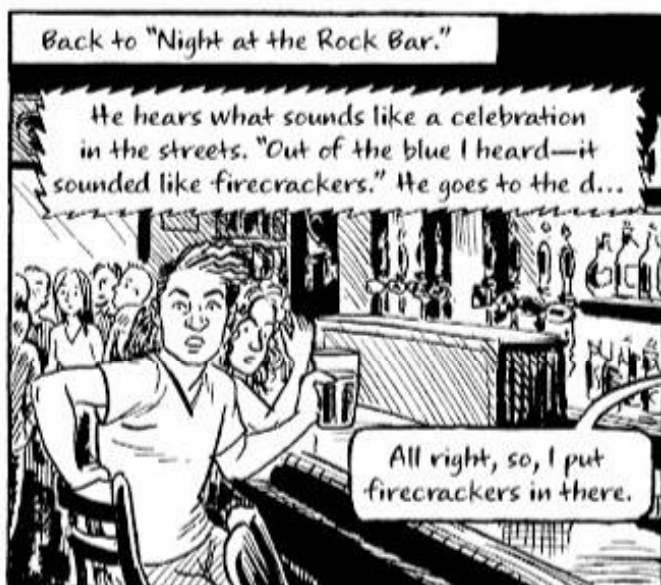
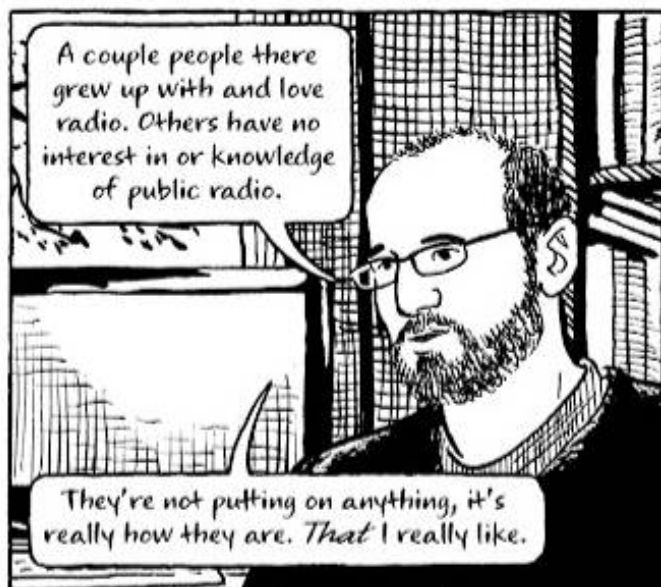
Awkward.

<[...] for five shekels [...] for four shekels... [Fresh watermelon!]>\*

I don't know what they're saying in this tape. I hope it's not something stupid.

\*Pat does not know that this is what they're saying.









Fortunately that's a feeling many musicians feel all the time, so it's not hard to find.



"When he looked me in the eye, I knew that I was the target. And he pointed the gun at me. And I was like, Oh my god, so I just spun around. And as I spun around, bullets started flying all around me."



"I literally felt a bullet fly by my ear, and then..."



Heavy drums, plus cymbals...



It's like an action-movie soundtrack.

This one was fun. It *was* like an action movie.

And everybody was OK with me making an action movie. For that one.



Well, we did have to tone it down.

Oh yeah, yeah.

Chaim runs from the gunman up some stairs behind a building and finds other people hiding there, one of whom had been shot.



So...

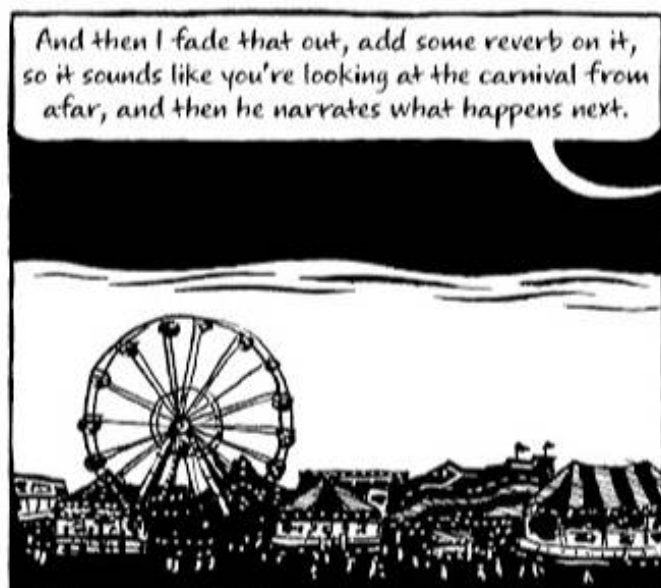
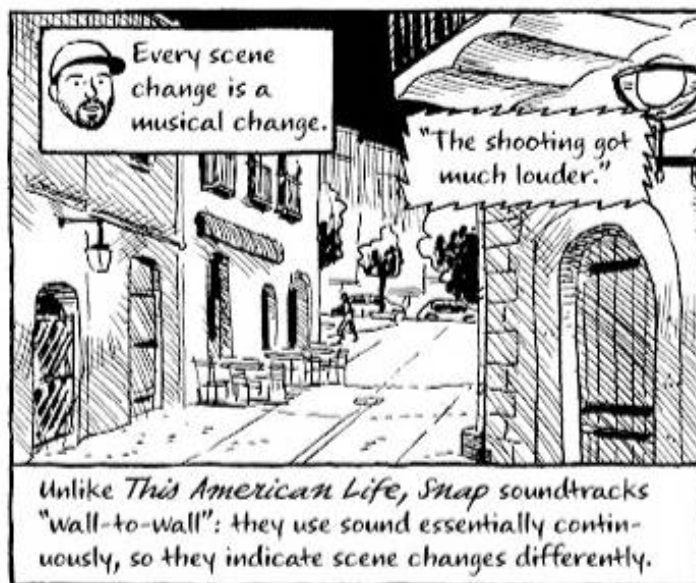
"...was shot, so I took off my belt and tied a tourniquet around his leg. Just trying to stem the bleeding."

Chaim stops the bleeding. But then...

The guy that's shot...

He stops the bleeding, right? And now something new is going to happen.

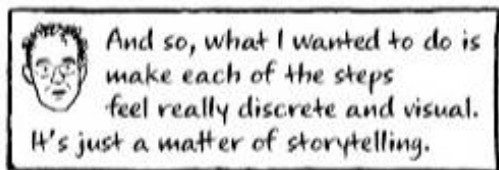
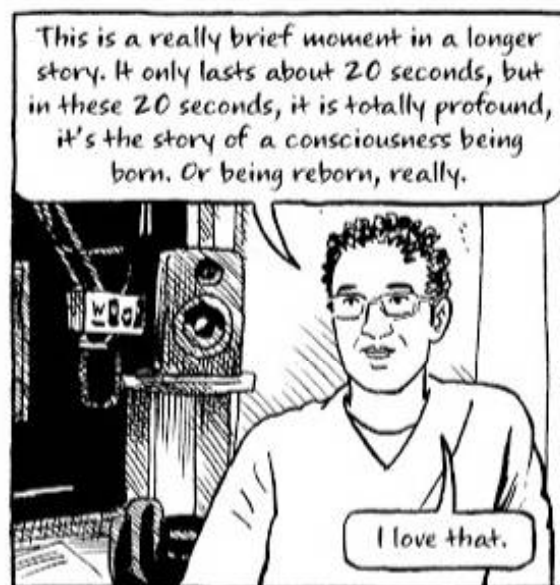






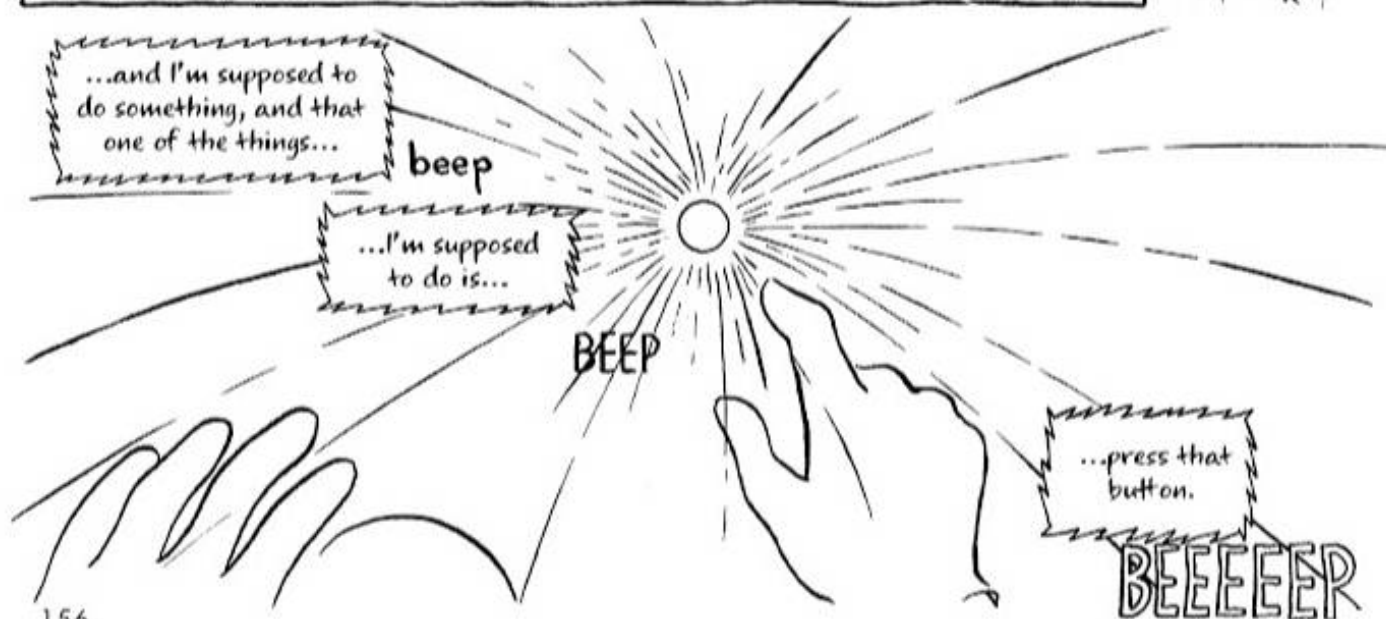
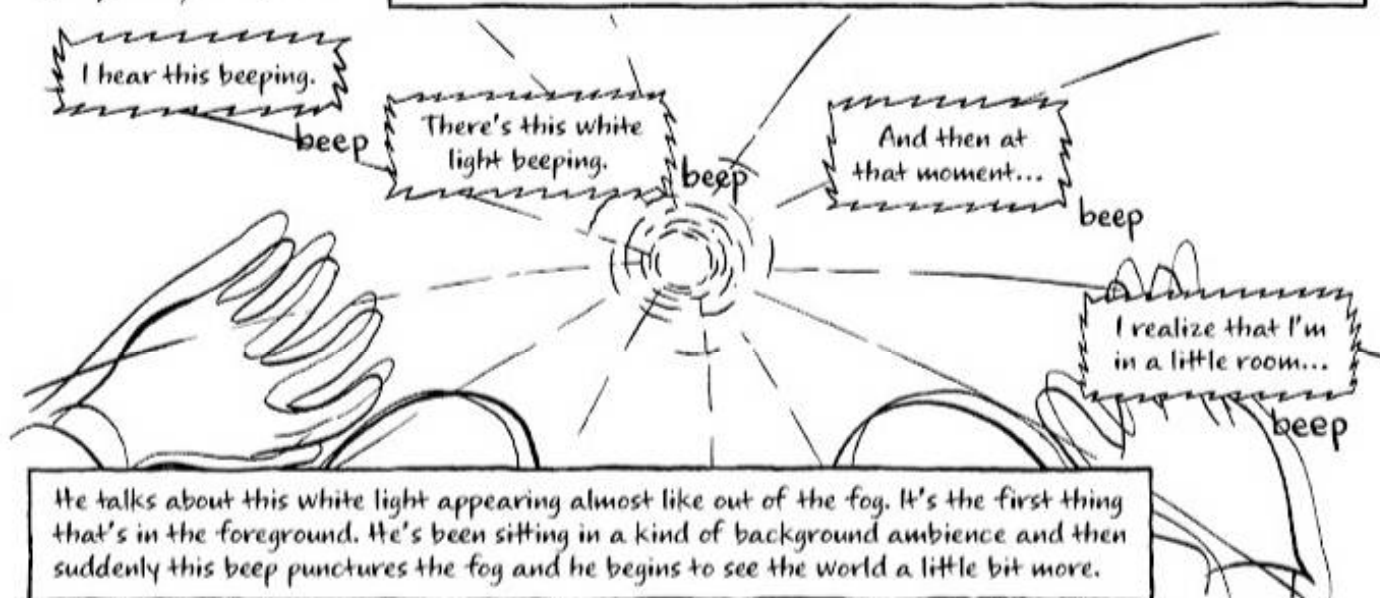
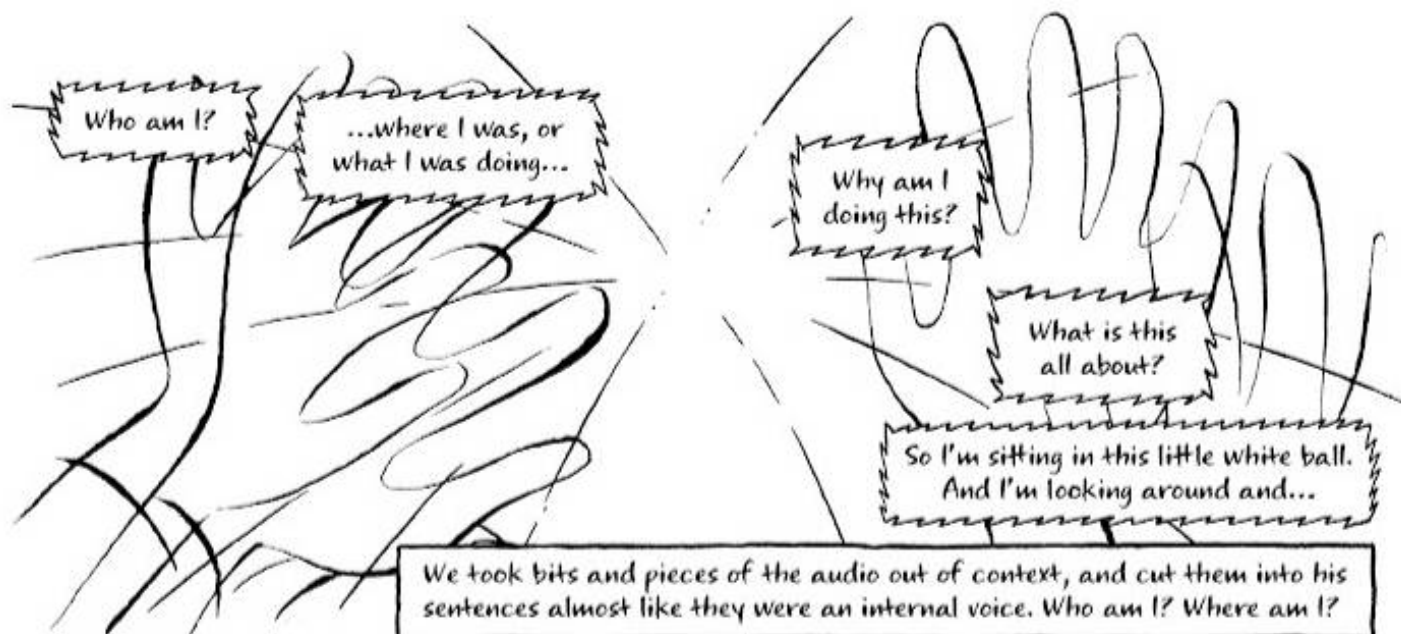


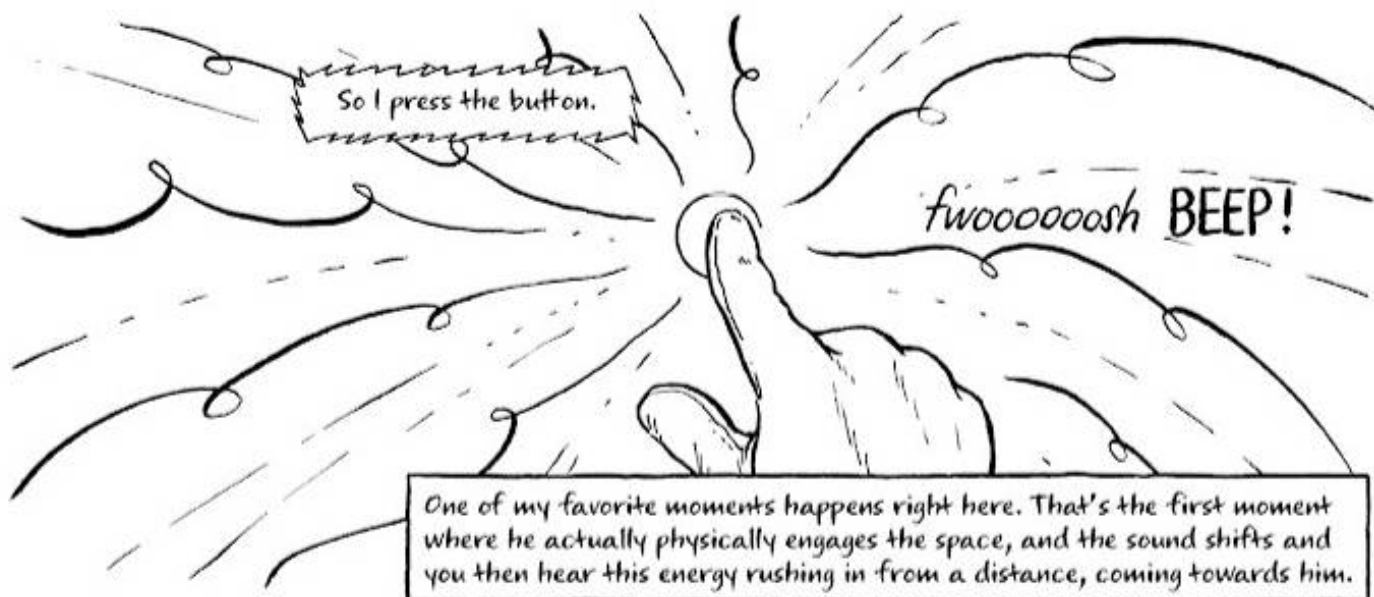
Jad Abumrad walked me through a short clip from a *Radiolab* story called "Out of Body, Roger," to show me how the sound told the story, part of which was about how test pilots in a centrifuge would pass out from G-forces, and how they would come back to consciousness.



When I woke up, I remember just sitting there, and I'm in this little white space. I actually had no idea who I was...

I wanted to create the sound of a void. But it's not an entirely pleasant void. This is an adult who has some weird shred of awareness, like, This isn't right. But it's calm and womb-like, and that's the starting point.





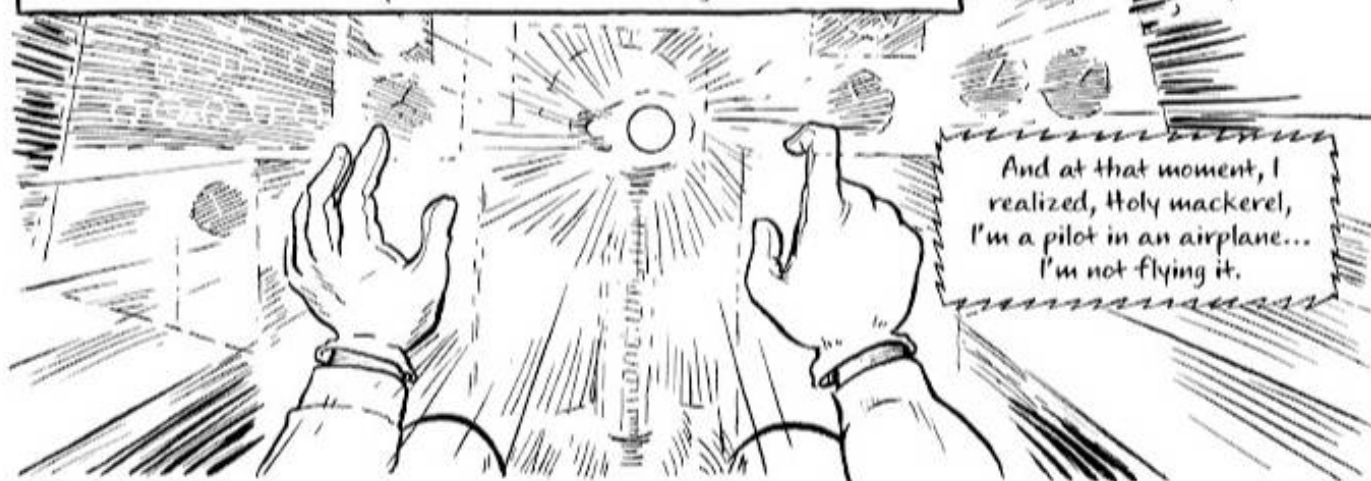
And listening back, I can hear what I was thinking. In the previous part of the story we had been talking about blood rushing from the brain down to the abdomen and back up. And so we already had this image in our brains of blood rushing.



I wanted it to feel like that energy in the distance coming towards him is the story of who he is. And it's rushing towards him and coming back. I wanted to create that feeling sonically.



And you hear this whoosh of energy and it lands. And so now the sound is dense. You hear the beeps, you hear all the computer sounds, you hear a kind of a roar from the speed at which he is moving. It's all there.



And at that moment, I realized, Holy mackerel, I'm a pilot in an airplane... I'm not flying it.





CHACK  
FOOSH



I'm Tim Sestak.  
Holy mackerel.



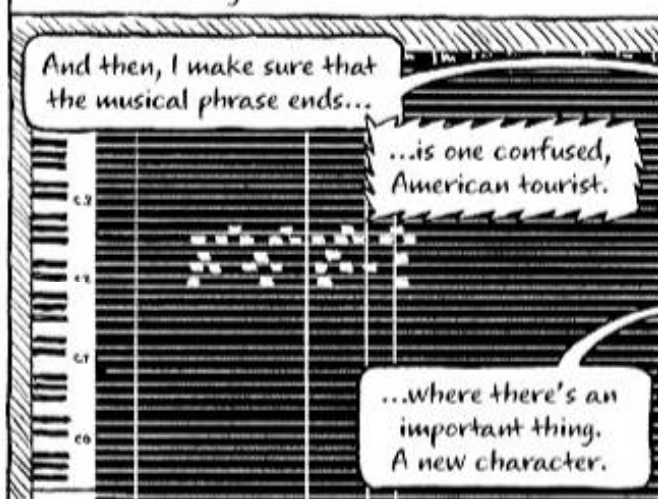
Back at the Rock Bar, Chaim is now up on the roof and gets a view of the scene. He sees two gunmen, and a civilian shooting down from a balcony.



Scoring wall-to-wall means there are lots of little moments that require some sonic change.



Sometimes sourcing existing music is just too time-consuming.



Like Jad, Pat is a musician, so he just fills in the gaps himself.



What's cool about being able to compose simple things like this is that I could go through Israeli music for a long time trying to find a musical phrase that will work for 12 seconds.





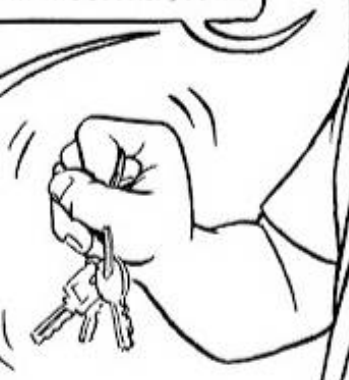
A soldier tackles the tourist to get him out of harm's way.



This is the army guy running. I made the effect in the sound booth.

I jangled my keys, and what else? I had my belt, the buckle for my belt, too. And just did like this...

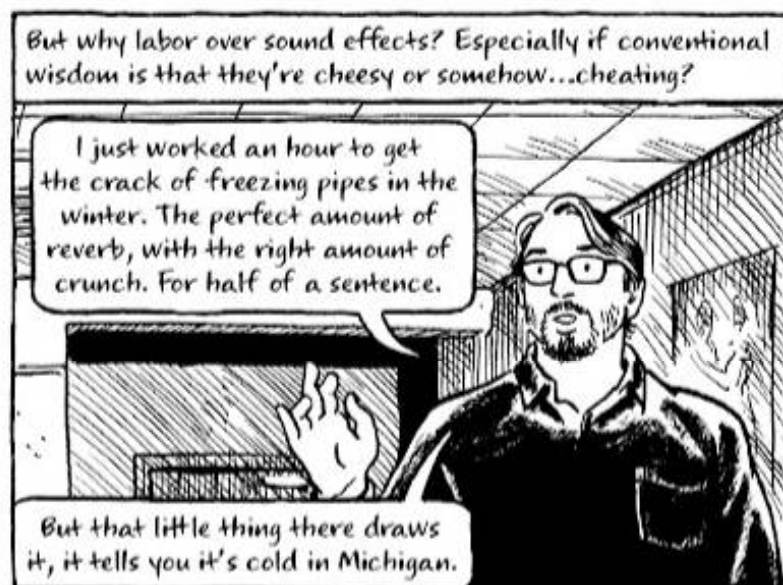
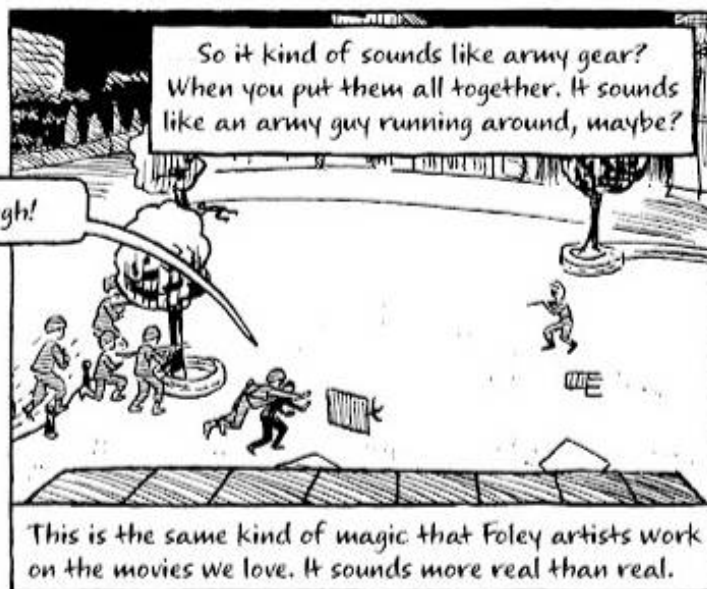
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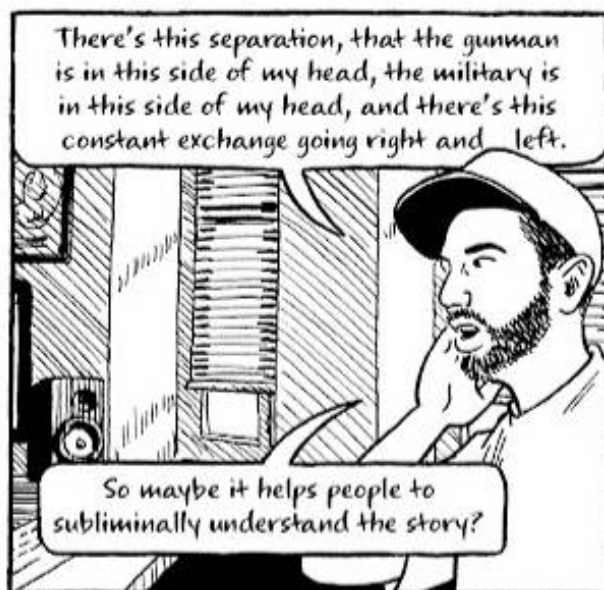
Pat played each element of the sound effect individually so I could hear how it was built.













Sound and music do a lot more than just clarify who is standing where, however. Sound can be a dowsing rod for hidden meanings.

Sometimes when I'm scoring a story, I've kind of mapped it out in my head. Oh, here we need this kind of mood, and over here that kind of mood.



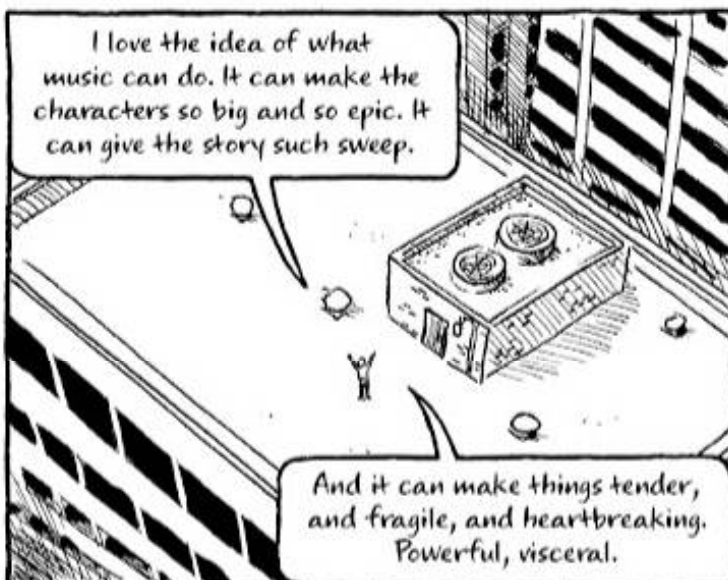
And I put in the piece of music that I don't think should work, and then it works.

And I always feel like, Ooooh. Interesting.



I didn't know that that feeling, or those ideas, or those unspoken thoughts, were in that tape. I didn't know that that was in there.

I love the idea of what music can do. It can make the characters so big and so epic. It can give the story such sweep.



And it can make things tender, and fragile, and heartbreaking. Powerful, visceral.

Is that fair?

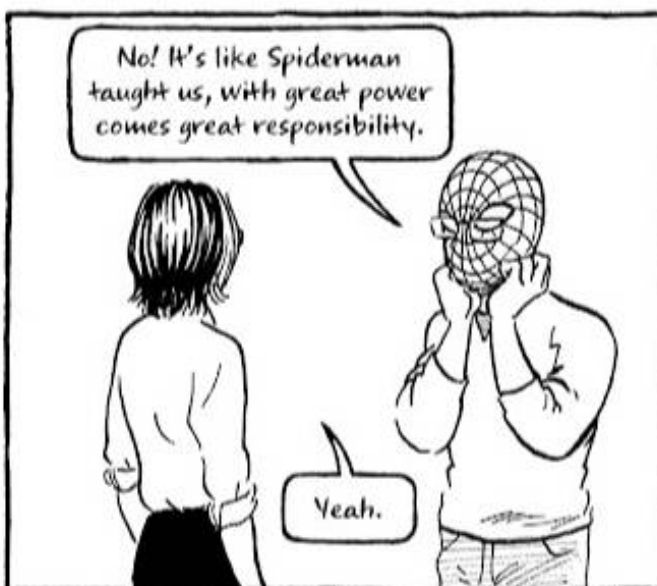
Ha ha!

Is it fair?



No! It's like Spiderman taught us, with great power comes great responsibility.

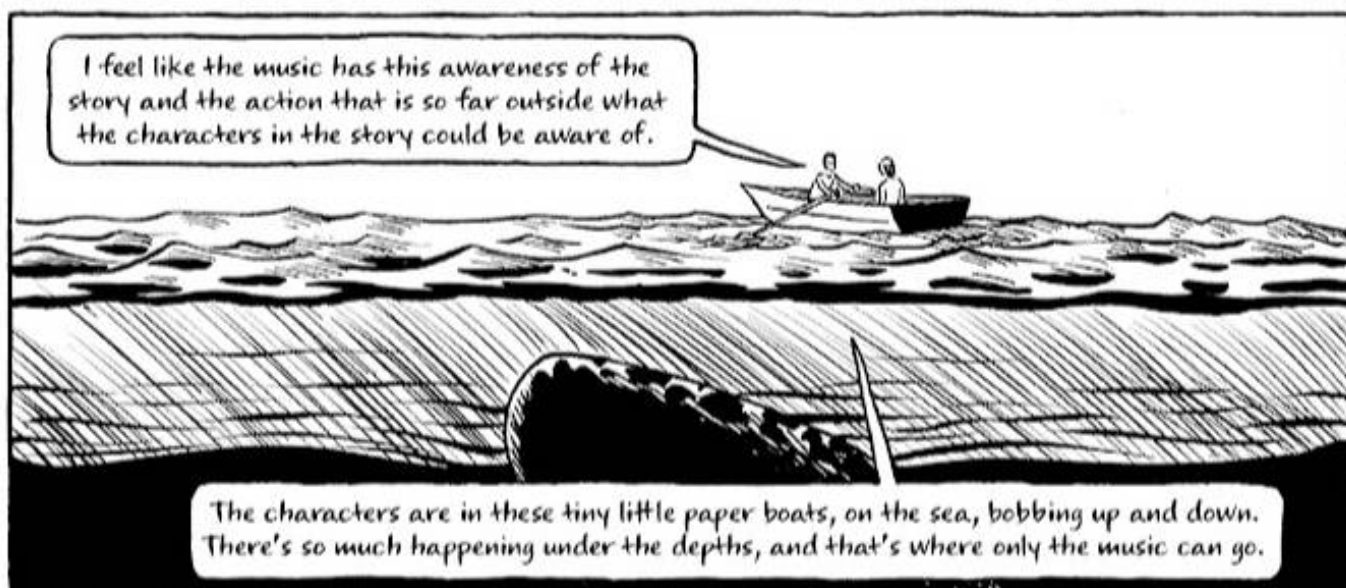
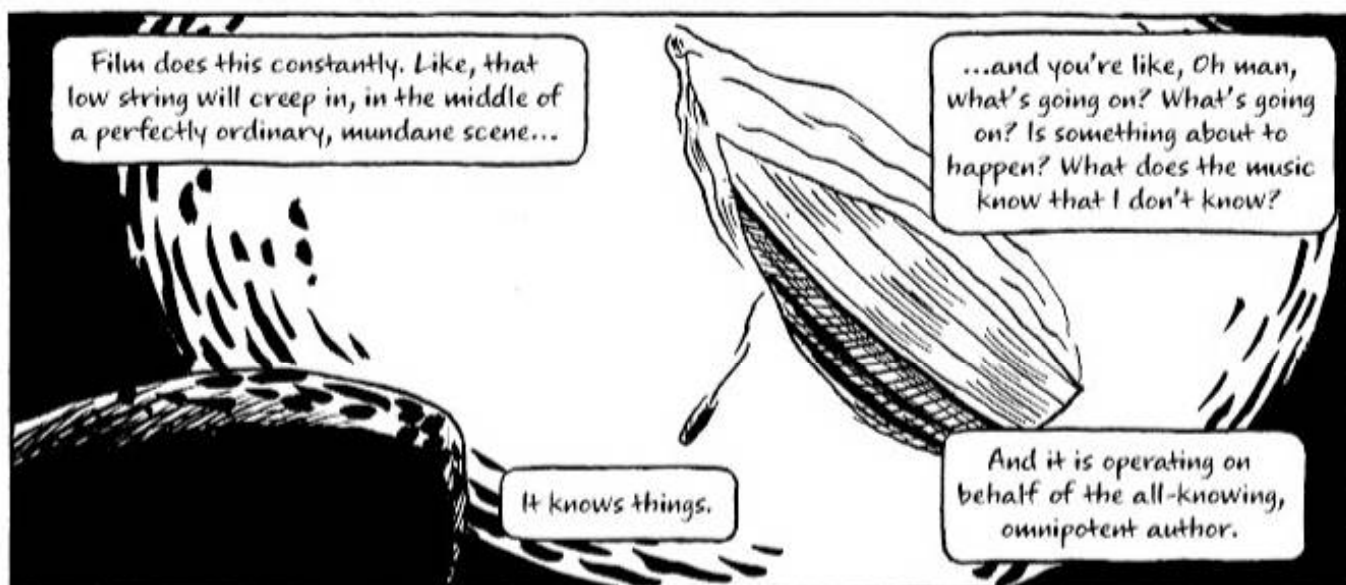
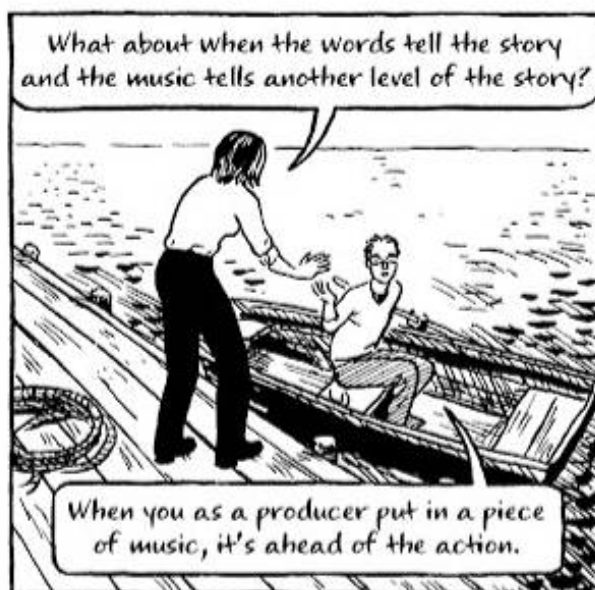
Yeah.



I do feel like people want to be told what's important. And music can do that really well.



They don't necessarily want to be told how to feel all the time. And so, I'm really careful with the scoring, much more so than I used to be. About using the music to inject emotion into the story.

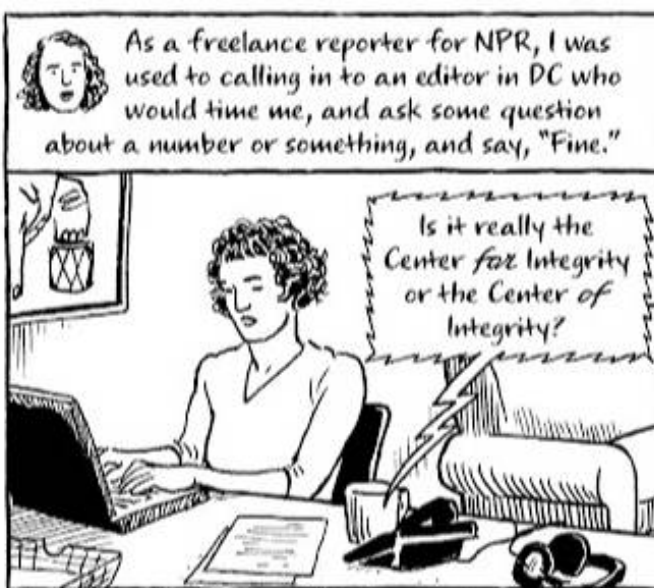


YOUR BABY'S UGLY:

# The Edit









Chana Joffe-Walt actually did the very first *Planet Money* story as a freelancer while she was still living in Seattle. She called in for an edit.



So, first of all, there were a ton of people on the phone.

And then we got to the end of the story and everybody said, It's really good, and I was like, OK, great! And I thought, This'll be over in ten minutes.



And then we spent like three hours talking!



Everybody left by the end, and it was just me and Alex.

And I remember sitting there the whole time and thinking, So, this is bad, right? This was three hours. It can't be good. It's a seven-minute story, and we're spending forever on it.

But I think it *was* actually good. It just got a bit better.



Probably a lot better.



## BACK AT THE SNAP...



OK, let's hit it.

At *Snap Judgment* on Wednesday, there was a first-draft edit for stories that would go on their "Coming to America" show.

But let's step back a minute. What's an "edit"?



We talked about "editing" in *Radios: An Illustrated Guide*. Editing is the literal cutting of tape to shorten and shape quotes and sound for a story.

An "edit" is another thing entirely. It's when a producer plays (or reads) a draft of a story out loud for a group of colleagues, and they verbally critique it.



I know it's confusing, but trust me, editing and edits are very different things.

I had been going around calling them "edit meetings" to keep them straight, and Ira gently corrected me.



We don't call them "edit meetings" at *This American Life*, we just call them edits.



At a lot of places they call them edits. At NPR they call them edits, like, "What time is your edit?"

By the way, I just signposted that for you. You're welcome.





This basic mode of the edit is common to many of these shows.

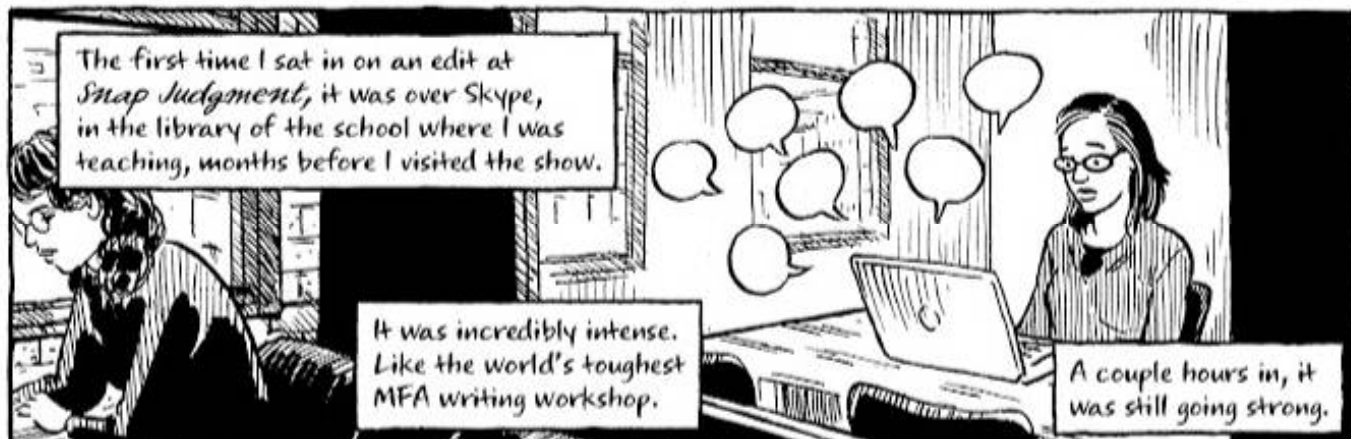


*Snap* does edits as if testing a high performance race car engine. In their drive to perfect their work and their need to produce quickly, they put themselves through a gauntlet of five edits in the three weeks I followed them.

In early stages, there are only maybe two listeners. But in most of the meetings, they had their entire staff of nine, including their webmaster and intern, in the room, actively participating.

They even asked me for my take.

The first time I sat in on an edit at *Snap Judgment*, it was over Skype, in the library of the school where I was teaching, months before I visited the show.



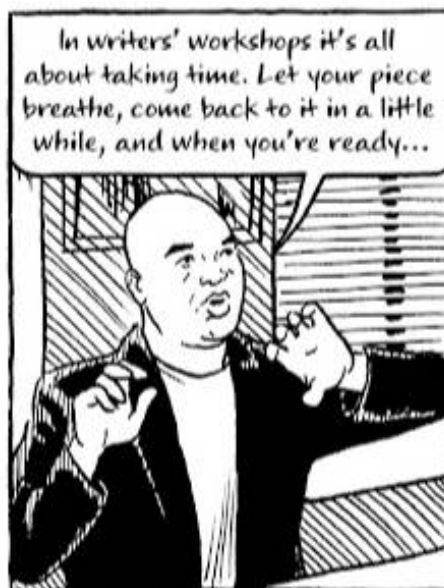
It was incredibly intense. Like the world's toughest MFA writing workshop.

A couple hours in, it was still going strong.

The critiquing process here is pretty much "Take the knives out and hit this."

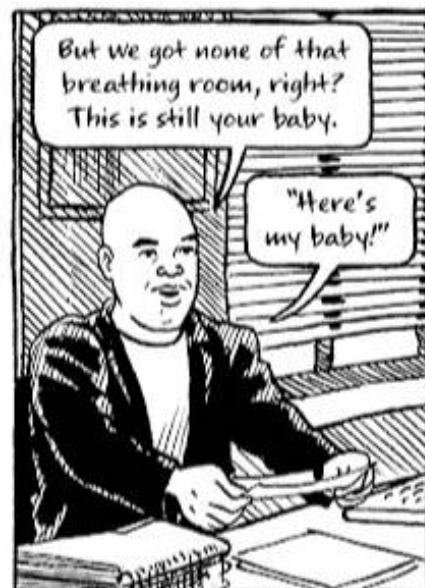


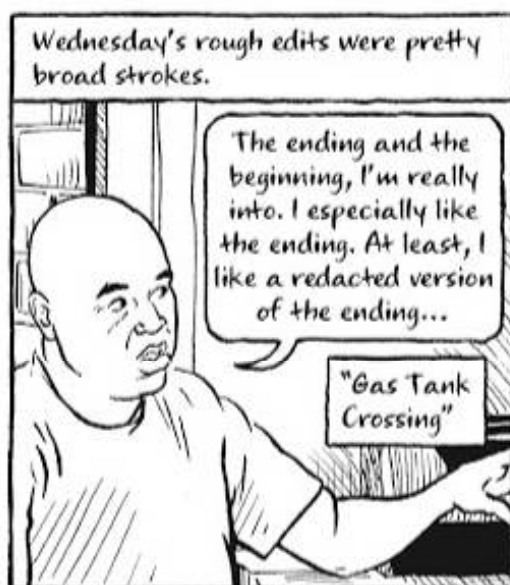
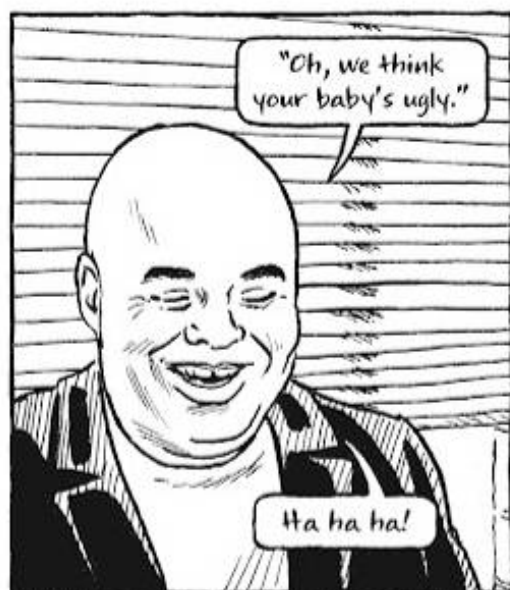
In writers' workshops it's all about taking time. Let your piece breathe, come back to it in a little while, and when you're ready...



But we got none of that breathing room, right? This is still your baby.

"Here's my baby!"



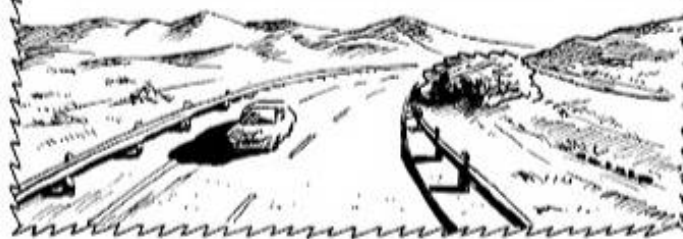




"Texas vs. Texas" by Stephanie Foo is the story of a man held hostage in his home by secessionists from the "Republic of Texas."



You know the scene. Miles of yellow desert, the sun-bleached skull of some poor animal. Tumbleweed blows across the screen...



Turns out, this is not an exaggeration. This is really what West Texas looks like.

I'm almost surprised when I come into an unlikely cluster of houses on a hill.



And there's this huge sign that says, "Warning, all trespassers are strictly forbidden."

Biggest problem: confusion. This is an action story that tells a series of complex events, with no pictures to anchor the listener. The setting was confusing.



Here's my thoughts about the opening, which I think we're not getting.

There are two things. One is, you have this classic scene of the wild West.





But the other thing is, this is a subdivision. Kind of.



It is a subdivision.



It is a subdivision. And the listener should really feel like they're Joe.



These people set up a militia camp, a mile away from a subdivision. And are going around with automatic weapons. This does not sit well with people who live in subdivisions.

Rick McLaren was a secessionist who believed that Texas was annexed illegally to the United States. McLaren organized a militia group... and set up a training camp a couple of miles down the road from Joe's house.

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It's crazy, these guys are nuts!



We gotta get that, because I don't feel that.

Recurring details were confusing.

OK, one more thing there—she mentions a manual?

She says, Remember the manual that Rick McLaren put together that shows you how to attack people?

McLaren even published manuals with instructions on creating homemade bombs and disabling civilians.



Pipe bombs, and...

To disable civilians.

I missed that.

They had pipe bombs, trip wires, and blow up things...



You could just say, Remember, the Republic of Texas put together a manual.

Yeah.

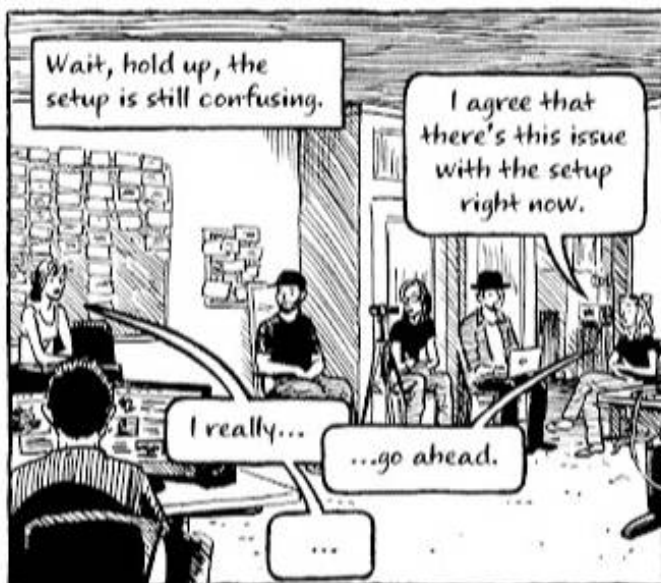
That would be better: the Republic of Texas did it. Leave out McLaren.

Wait, hold up, the setup is still confusing.

I agree that there's this issue with the setup right now.

I really...

...go ahead.



...It seems like there needs to be fewer conflicting images. Because there's going to be so much complexity coming up. So we go from the wild West, to a subdivision...

I honestly think that if you just give me a shot at rewriting it...I know it's complicated. I can do it.





That's fine, that's great, you can do that. I just think you might benefit from having a few comments.



Totally, I just think that in terms of the setup, I need to rewrite the whole thing, I totally recognize that, it's totally not really final, I can figure that out.

Great.

OK, back to our story.

Names were confusing.



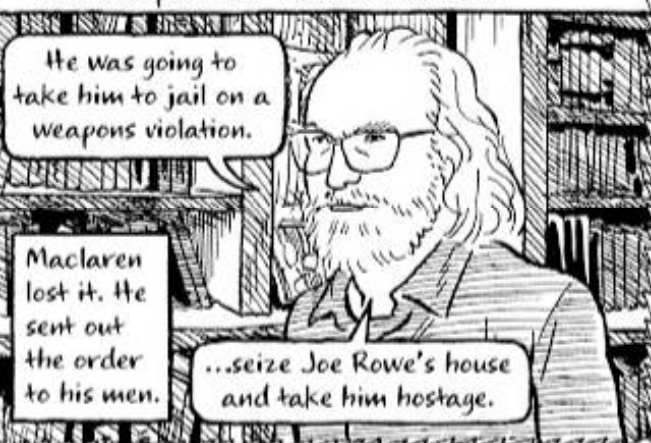
At the beginning, I thought Joe was the main character, and then suddenly McLaren is talked about?



So like, not only will Joe shoot you for trespassing, he also started this Republic of Texas thing? Was I the only one who got mixed up? There were a lot of names.



MacLaren said that if anybody messed with the Republic of Texas, he would get his revenge...One day, the sheriff pulled over a Republic of Texas militiaman.



He was going to take him to jail on a weapons violation.

MacLaren lost it. He sent out the order to his men.

...seize Joe Rowe's house and take him hostage.

Greg Paulson was the man in charge of the mission. And Richard Keys was his lackey. Joe heard them pull up his driveway.



Greg Paulson approached the back door. And he told me, "Surrender, you're under arrest, we've come to take you hostage."



And I thought we were talking about the same guy. I guess I just forgot Joe's last name.



I'm assuming that he got shot through a window or something?

Yeah, he got shot through a window.

I was on the inside of the door, he was on the outside over there. I had a pistol pointed at him, he had a rifle pointed at me. We had what you call kind of a Mexican standoff there for a minute.



Right. Before that, in my mind I have them in a Mexican standoff.

Door to door, yeah.

He said, Lay down your weapon, there's more of us than there are of you. That was a fact. I could see that.



I always thought that a Mexican standoff required three people.

It's more like a Mexican predicament.

Ha hahahaha!

And when I raised back up he shot me. He shot three times.

What's it like to get shot?





Then, when he gets shot, he's got this shrapnel, glass all over everywhere, and then he's like, Oh this ain't going so well.



It hurts! Ha ha ha. Hurts. But it's quick.

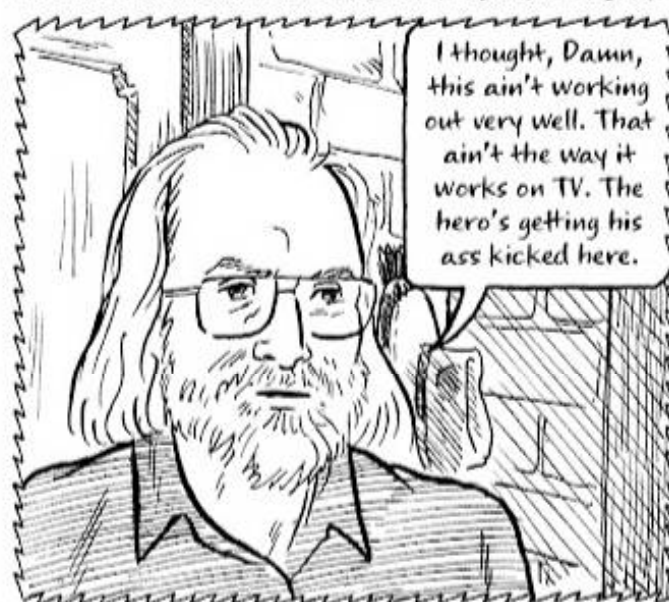
Shrapnel, glass, in my face and chest. That make blood run everywhere, make you think, you're really hurt.



You need the fact that he has shrapnel, you need the part where he's telling you what the wound is.



I think the shrapnel, glass, I don't need to hear that. All I need to hear is that there's blood everywhere.

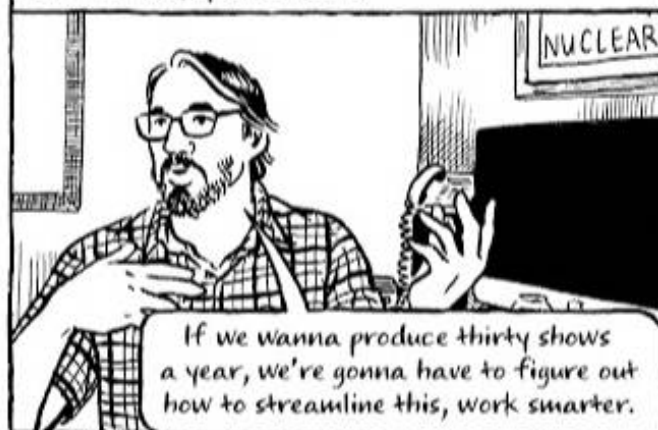


I thought, Damn, this ain't working out very well. That ain't the way it works on TV. The hero's getting his ass kicked here.



Yeah.

This second edit on the show took almost three hours. While I was with them, *Snap* was in the midst of an existential struggle over the amount of time they spent on edits.

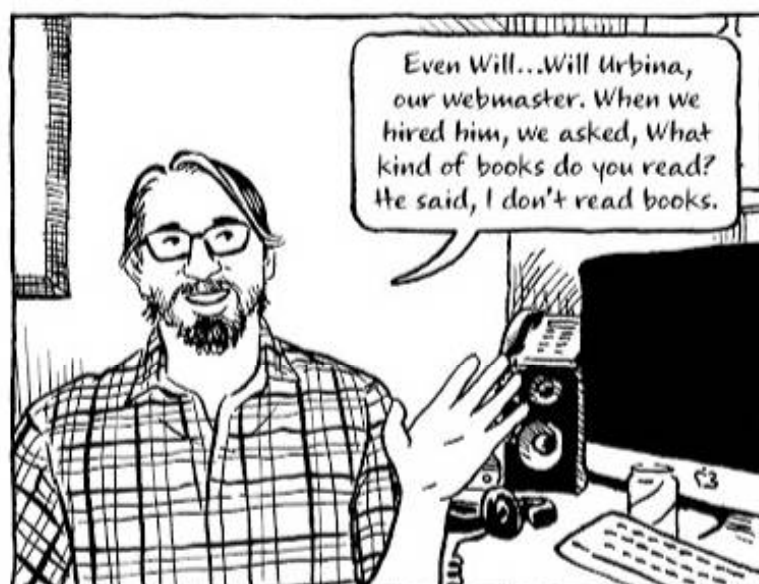
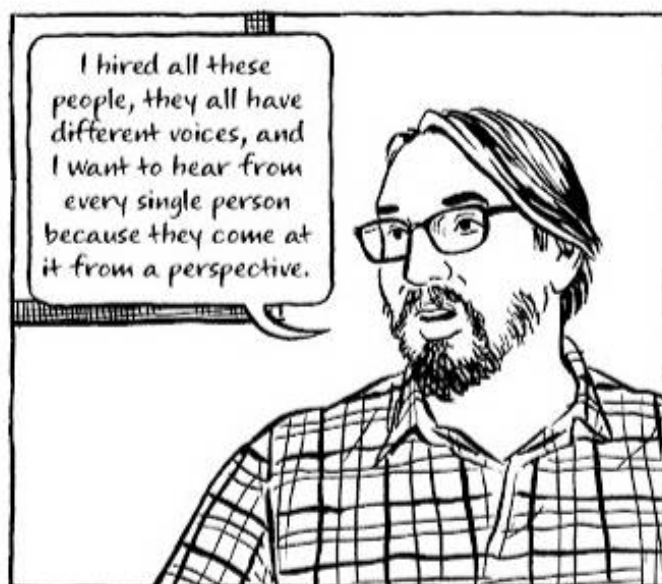


If we wanna produce thirty shows a year, we're gonna have to figure out how to streamline this, work smarter.

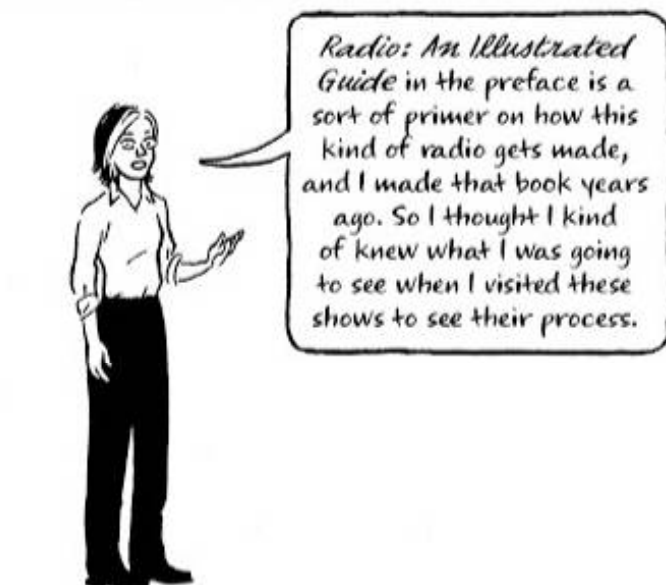
Think about it: with nine people in the room, that's nine potential hours of work every hour they spend on the edit. That's a huge cost.



I have no idea what the alternative is. They want everybody there listening to all the stories.







The Moth produces live storytelling, yet their edits are remarkably similar.



We do a group rehearsal. We have a little space in our office, it's really cute, it's got couches, and a little curtain that pulls around and makes it a little room.

It's all of our artistic team and all the other storytellers in the show, and they each stand up and tell their story to the others.



It can be very awkward.

That's part of the design—we do it because if you can stand up and tell your story in what's essentially a glorified conference room in front of 15 other people at two in the afternoon...



...then chances are it will seem like such a relief to walk out on stage two days later and do it in front of a live audience with lights.

When I'm directing a story, I might have heard two hours of material around the story, which is cut down to 10 minutes.



So, to me the story might be perfectly clear, but one of my co-directors, or one of the other storytellers, might be confused.

And it's a smart group of people—if somebody there is confused, there would have been 15 people in the audience who would have been confused.



Then, the storytellers spend the two days after the rehearsal working with their director to incorporate any notes into the story.

Before he was at *Radiolab*, Sean Cole was a contributor to *Marketplace*, a daily economic news show that uses a more conventional model of edits.



Meaning, you're editing voices, you're adding music and sound, you're building the complete, layered structure of the story. This is an incredibly demanding and time-consuming process, and then...



And they say, OK, do this, talk to this person, so maybe move this, do that, I have this question, blah blah blah.



So then you make it again.

It's iteration after iteration. This is completely opposite from the way *Marketplace* works, and NPR News. By then you would have done a year's worth of stories...

But the desire to create a fairly complete draft before sharing it means producers can spend forever tweaking it.



...and how about now, are you ready?

Well, no, I still have this problem...





And then I'm your friend. I asked you for a pile of crap, so when I look at it and say it's a pile of crap, I'm not saying that as a critical boss.

That's what I expected, because you hadn't had much time with it, but you have to get it out.

You have to get the story out in front of other people. And then take it back to work on alone.

Put it in front, bring it back in, get it out and put it in front, bring it back in, get it out... If you haven't done that six times, it's not going to be a good story.

God knows, iterations should be some kind of religion.

I'll endlessly tell my producers: Put it on your phone, walk around the block with it. Move your physical position and listen to it in a different space.

It's particularly true when you're working on something alone. You have to find ways to access different parts of your brain as a storyteller.

You have to find spaces to be analytic...

...and then find spaces to be visceral, bodily.

If you're going to understand what's going on in the story, you have to pay attention to your body.

What is story actually supposed to do to your body?

You're creating a series of sensations, physical sensations.

What does awe feel like?



It sounds a bit fruity, but what does something feel like when it's awesome, and what does it feel like when something is a little confusing?

What does density feel like?

I've trained myself to not really be super self-conscious about it, but if I happen to shift while I listen to a story, I'll notice that.

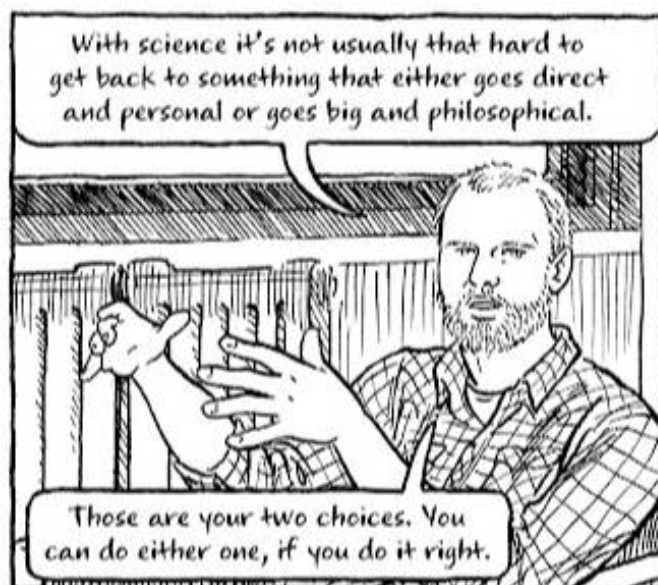
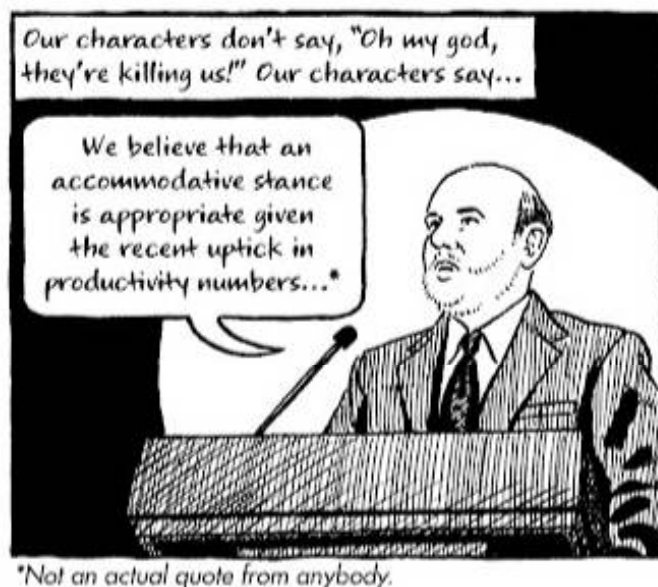
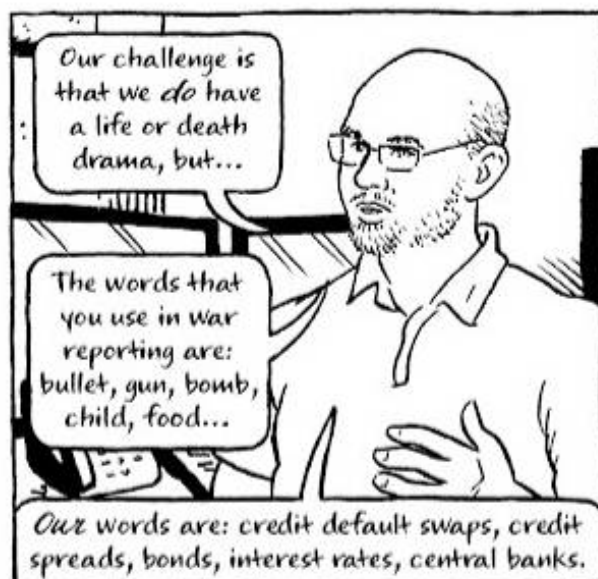
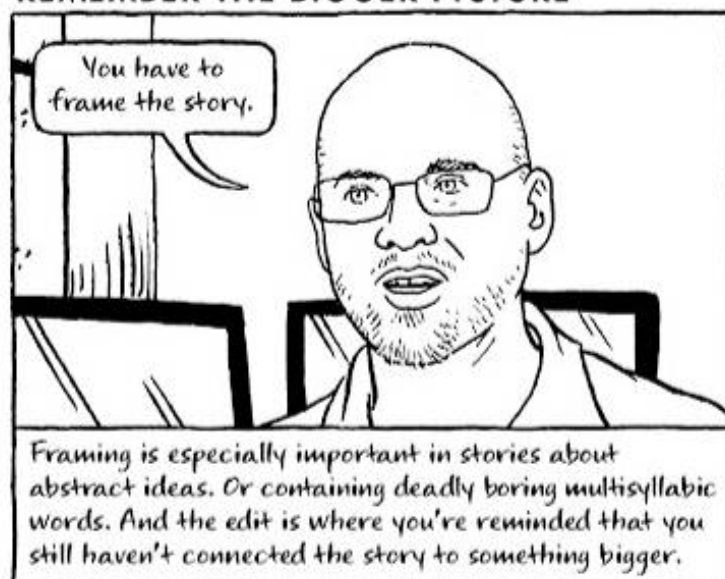
Our biggest hope is that our pieces will actually, and I mean this literally, move people.

I want bodily reactions, I want the face to change, I want the sitting position of the listener to change. That's the reaction I want.

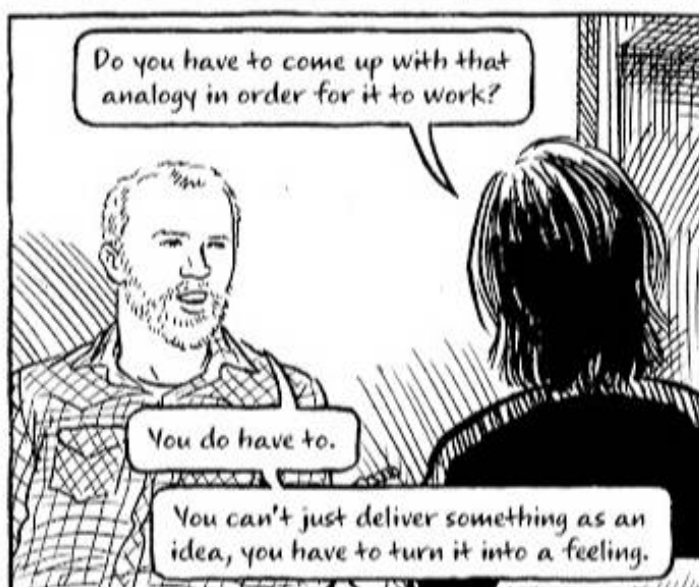
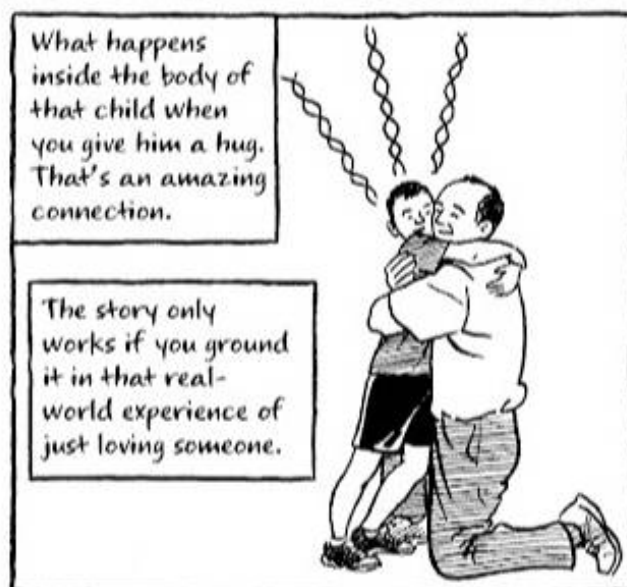
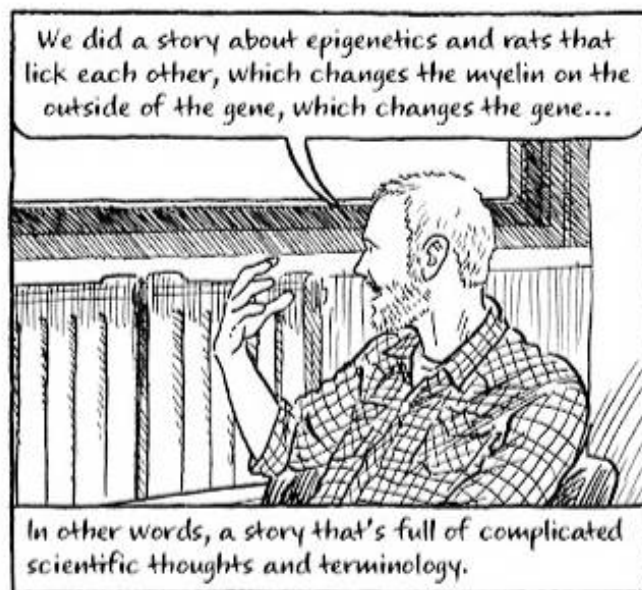
It's the editorial process that pinpoints where those reactions are happening. And where they're *not* happening.

Edits are where you find solutions to problems you may not have even known you had.

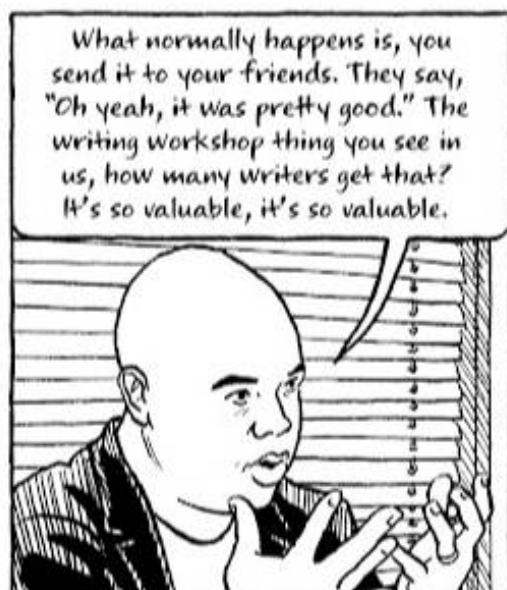
## REMEMBER THE BIGGER PICTURE

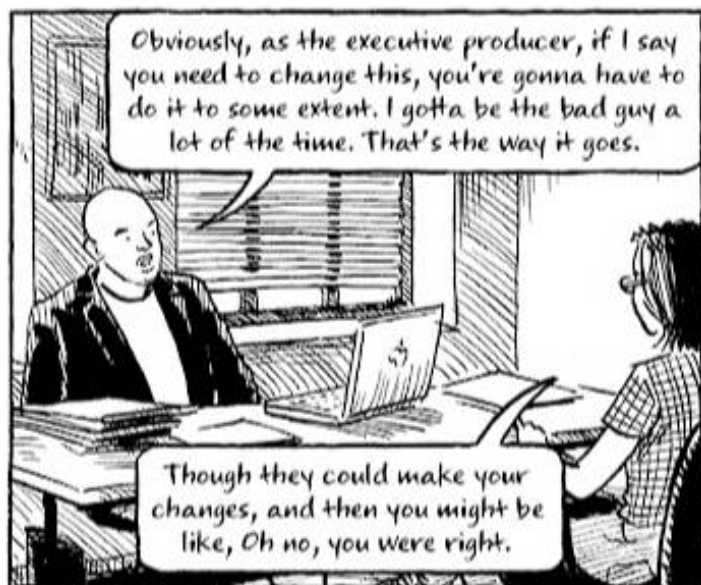
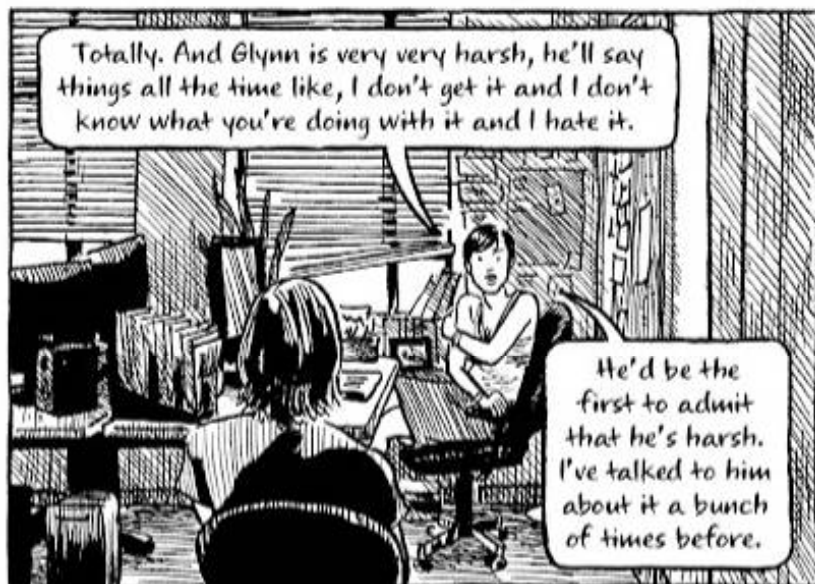




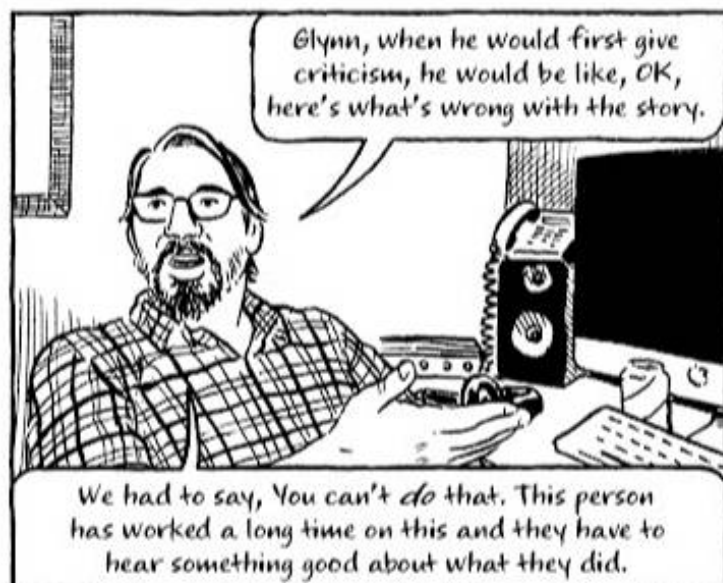
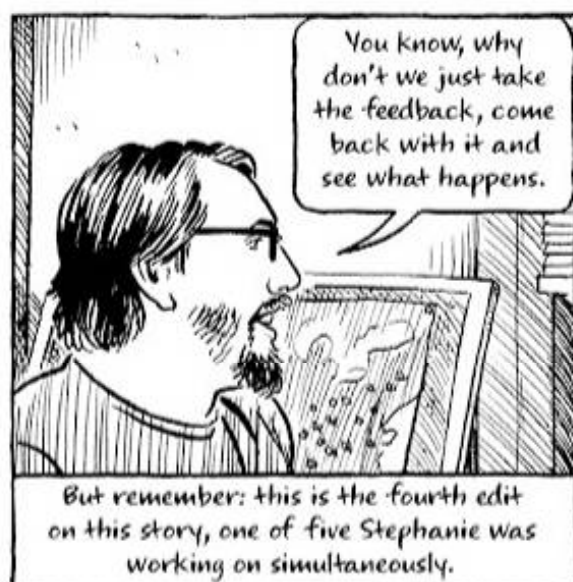


# YOU HAVE TO DEVELOP A THICKER SKIN. YOU JUST HAVE TO.









And his attitude was like, You're in this room for a reason, you're good at what you do. So take that for granted, and let's just move on.

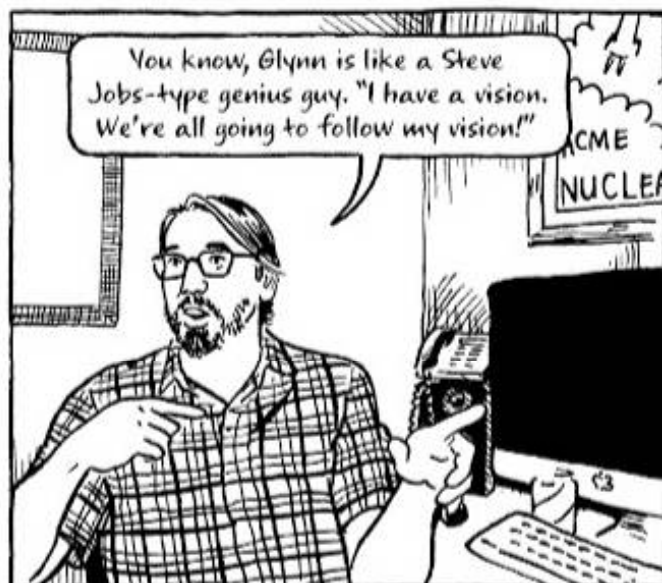


But the other thing is, we're on a time frame, right?

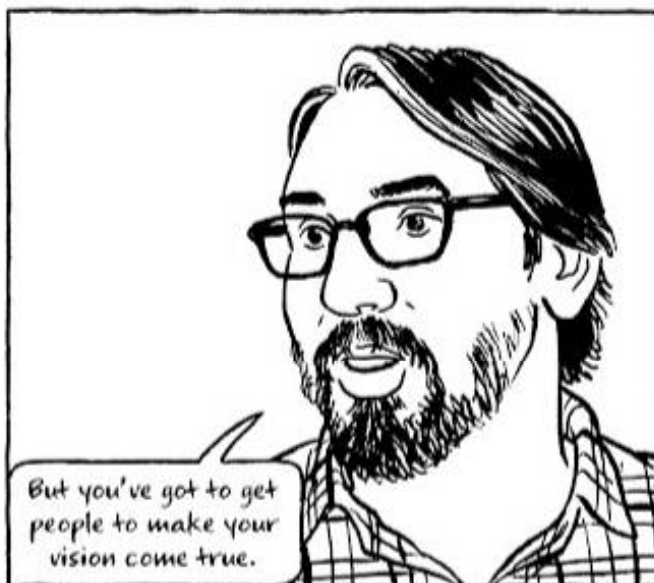


So I need that person that you just gave feedback to, to come out of that room and start doing that story right away. Not go and mope for eight hours.

You know, Glynn is like a Steve Jobs-type genius guy. "I have a vision. We're all going to follow my vision!"



But you've got to get people to make your vision come true.



This woman, I just don't really trust or get her, but I think I like the story a lot.



Gas Tank Crossing is about a woman who immigrated illegally to the U.S. at the age of 13, stashed in the gas tank of a car.

I think it's confused thematically. There's the beginning and end about Mexican culture being supportive, and her not loving the U.S.



The experience was terrifying, but ultimately uneventful.

And then there's the middle section about a tension building, but nothing actually really happens.

I have kind of a similar issue with it.

Still, the woman had her doubts about whether it was worth it, and felt she'd never make her own daughter go through the same experience.

Would this address your concerns, Pat, if we made the whole arc "I would not put my daughter in that situation..." and forget the stuff about...

..."maybe I would have been better off had I stayed in Mexico."

Is that the line that bothers you?

I thought you loved that line.

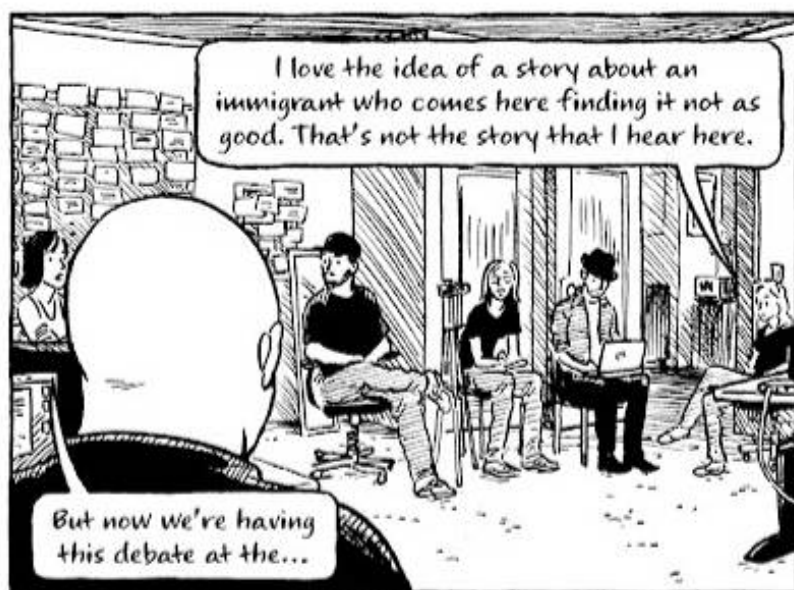
The takeaway is interesting in that it's really that complex.

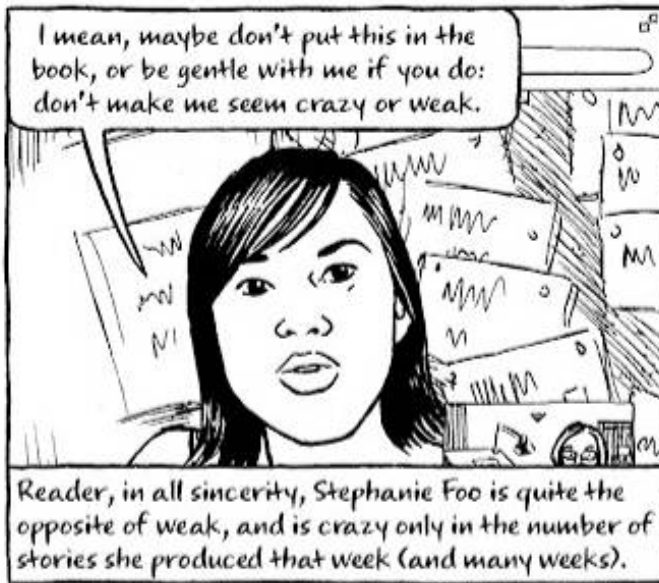
I don't really want to dumb it down just to make it more linear.

I don't think the complexity is the problem. I think what we're trying to say is that the arc doesn't really make sense.

We are focusing on this girl's crossing, and there's no payoff structurally at the end of the story, or at least not enough to justify that whole thing. She's talking about something completely different.











# WHAT THEY'RE SAYING IS, YOU FAILED.



Sometimes people will give you notes on your piece, and you really disagree with the notes. There's something in your piece that they really didn't like, and the way they say it to you is really wrongheaded.



But I think you still want to notice they didn't get this part. You know what I mean? Even if they're not saying it right.

Yeah.



Especially if it's something that you love, if they didn't get it, it means you really need to think, Wait, what did I do wrong, that they are not loving this the way that I love this.



And even if you hate them, and disagree with everything they're saying, what they're saying to you is You failed.



Which is a good reason to hate them and everything they're saying.

That goes without...

That of course is true.



Me, I get really mad. I get so mad.

I feel so like, NO. No, this is good. I'm sure it's good.



When you have an edit you get mad about it?

I totally get mad. I'm a goddamn baby. And it's not good to show that. I know better, I try to keep it to myself. But I'm a big baby.





Is it ever difficult for you to take those edits?

Um, no. I don't think...No. You mean like for my ego?

If I've been working really hard on something, even if it's just these guys, I still get nervous right before I read. But I don't think I find it hard to have the edit.



This style of editing where you're all in a room can be hard, right?

Because you've come to believe that you're really good at your job, you've been doing it forever and you hear people say nice things about your work, and then you come here and it gets torn to shreds.

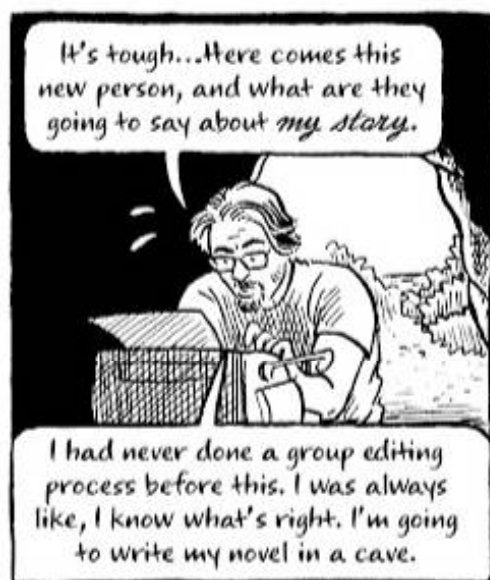


It happens to all of us... And it's a better product for it. But it's a little tough on the ego.

I'm interested to read your book about how everyone else does it.

Obviously it totally depends on the person. Chana said, "I kinda like it. I might get nervous but I like it."

She's younger than all of us and more secure. Zoe too.



It's tough...Here comes this new person, and what are they going to say about *my story*.

I had never done a group editing process before this. I was always like, I know what's right. I'm going to write my novel in a cave.



But why not hear what everyone thinks? Everyone is a listener. The listeners at home do it to you all day, and they're worse, they're not nice about it.

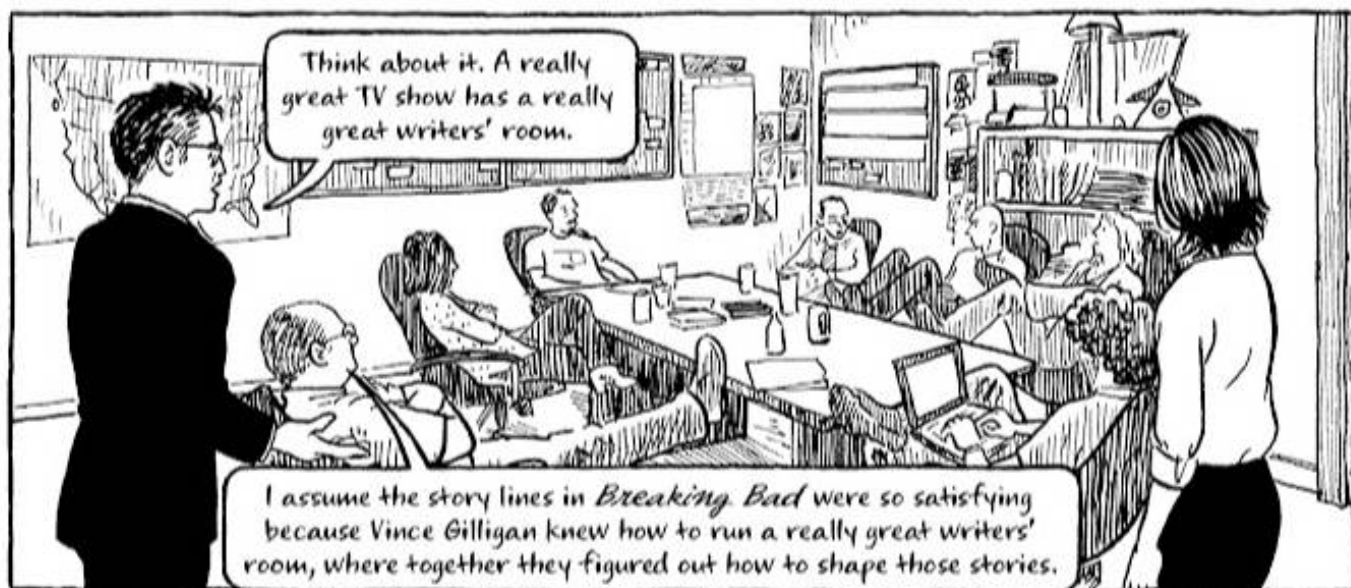
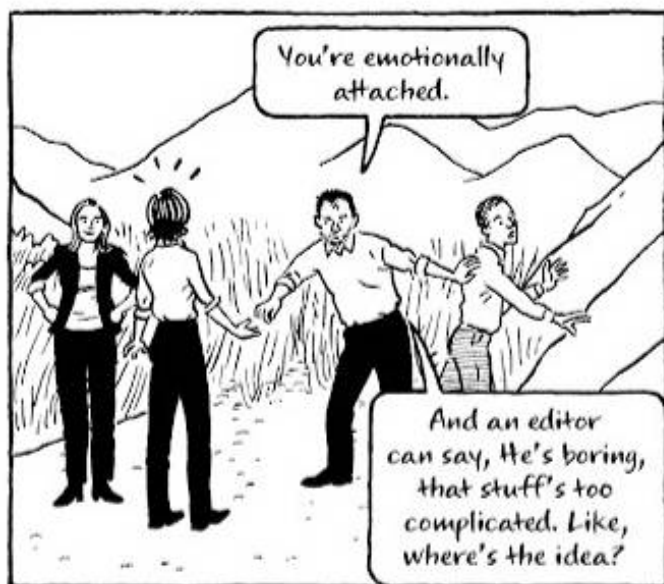
It's like Ira said: You may hate it, but they are 100% right. Why? Because they can tell you what they actually hear, as opposed to what you *think* you said.





## GETTING LOST, AND GETTING FOUND





I think that's absolutely true. Editing is essential, no matter what you're creating. And it's something that many many people miss in their process.



My first skill was editing. I wasn't a good writer, I didn't know how to be a reporter, I wasn't talented at performing on the radio.



The only thing I had was, I was a good editor.

Of course you're an excellent editor with years of experience. But not everyone gets the benefit of an Ira Glass edit.



The home version of this is, You really do just play it for your friends. And get them to give you notes.



And I think it might be about as effective, is the truth.

People aren't going to have all sorts of tricks to fix your problems the way we have for one other, because we do this every day.



But I think you get the kind of feedback you need to make your story good.





a's saying is  
ditor is to s  
your emotion  
h look at ho  
ove with thi

What Ira's saying is, perhaps the most important role of an editor is to simply *not* be you. That distance from your emotional life is crucial to good judgment.

"Oh look at how I fell in love with this artist!"

I think a lot of times, that's what drives things.



Assume that they're *not* interested in your artist, or that they don't think your thing is lovely.



I feel like we're trying to make a dream. And you develop an intuition for, Oh god, the dream just got pierced right there.



Because there was too much information, or we skipped over a question people would naturally ask

There is a sort of constant seduction that has to happen.



You're trying to seduce people into this world that you care about, but which they probably have every reason not to care about.

"I'm not worried about him. I'm just painting a lovely picture of him, and, oh, and this lovely music..."

"I'm not worried about how much *you* the listener love him, I'm just painting a loving picture of him, and, oh, and this lovely music..."

No!



Every three seconds, there's gotta be something happening. It's just a relentless and obsessive acute awareness of the listener. And the fact that you might be about to lose 'em.



But it's funny, when we're actually trying to make these stories, the audience is so far from our minds.



I don't want anything to pierce the dream. Because I want to fall into the dream myself. Even though I've heard the story 1000 times.

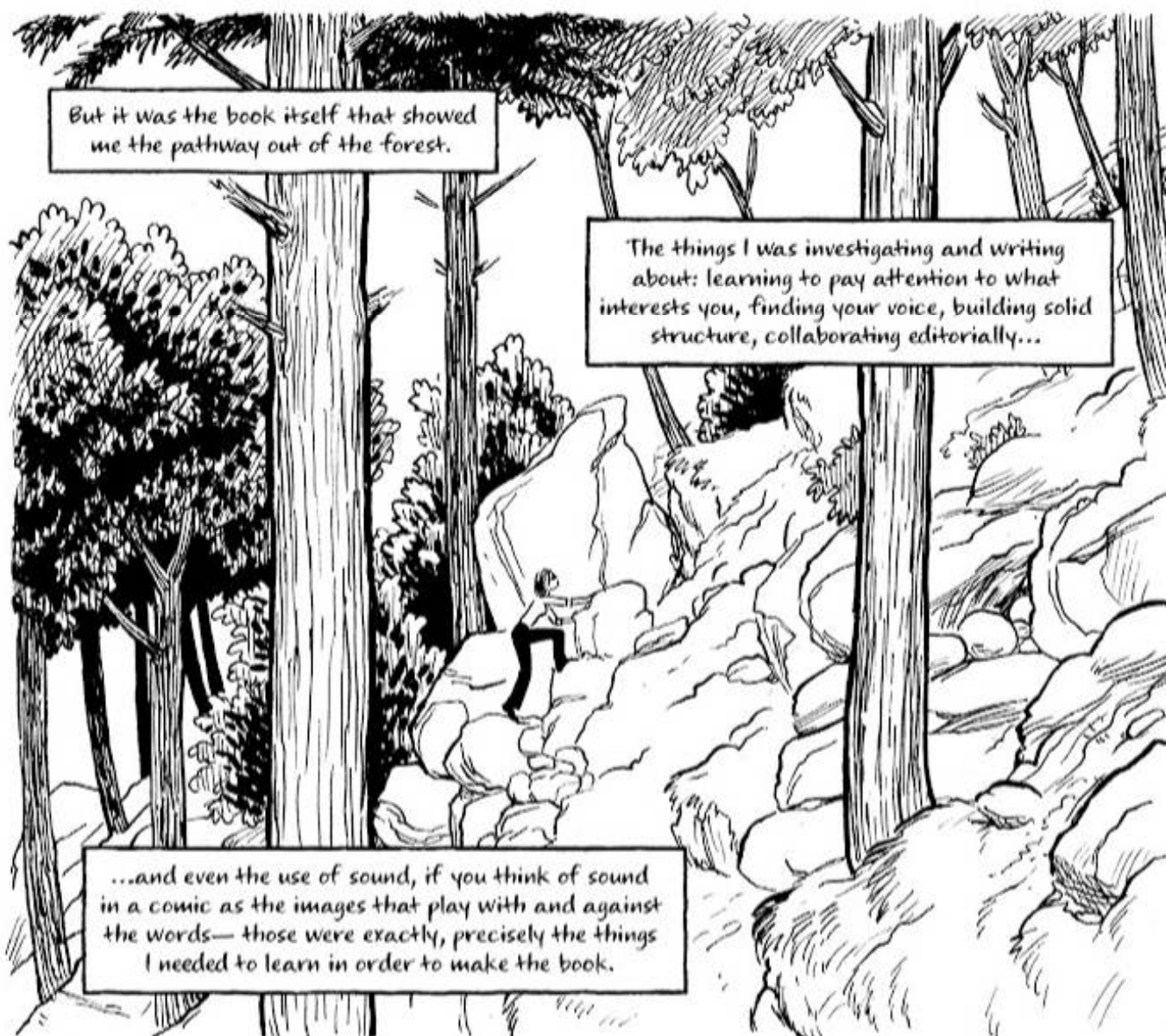
I don't want anything to pierce the dream. Because I want to fall into the dream myself. Even though I've heard the story 1000 times.

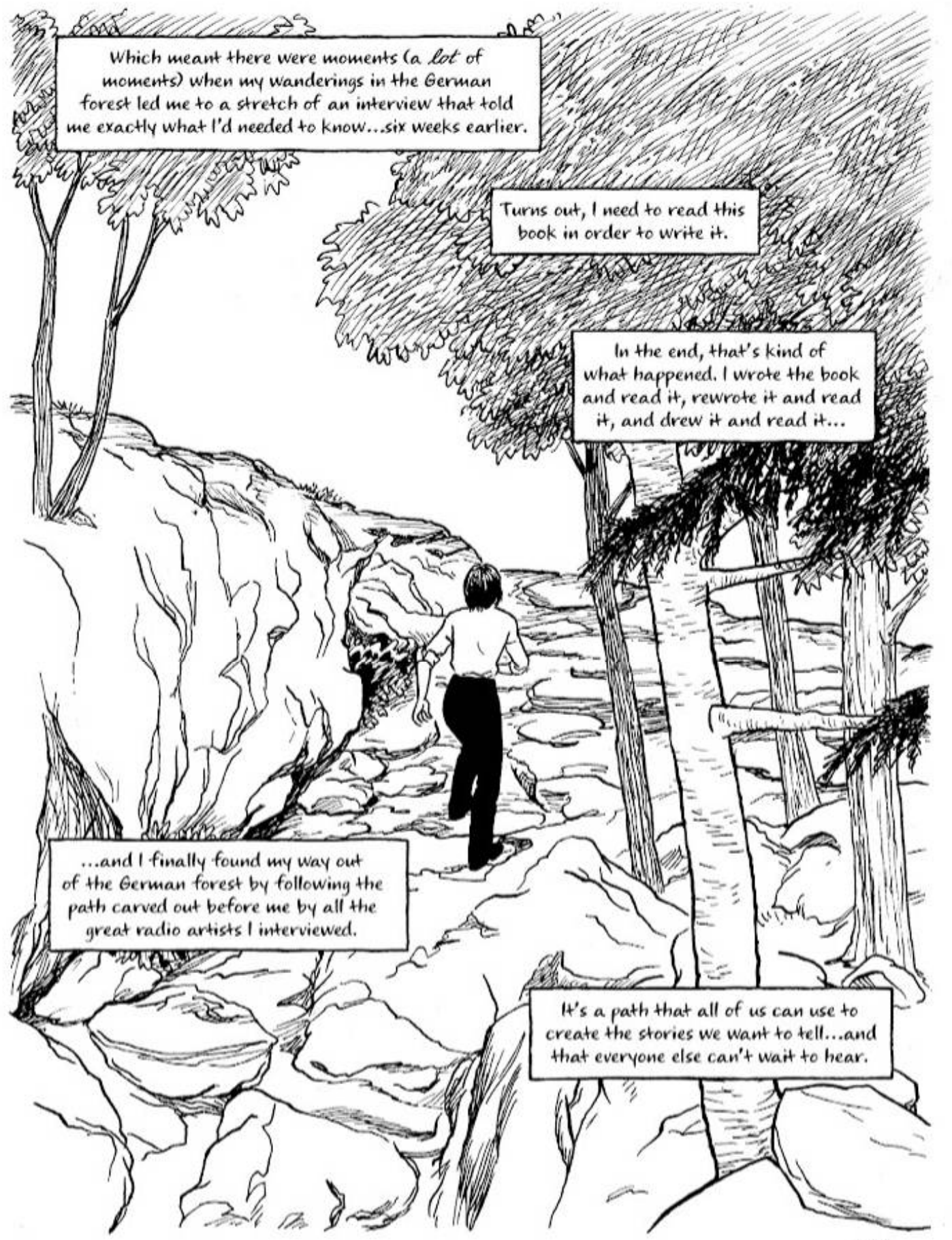


## Epilogue









Which meant there were moments (a lot of moments) when my wanderings in the German forest led me to a stretch of an interview that told me exactly what I'd needed to know...six weeks earlier.

Turns out, I need to read this book in order to write it.

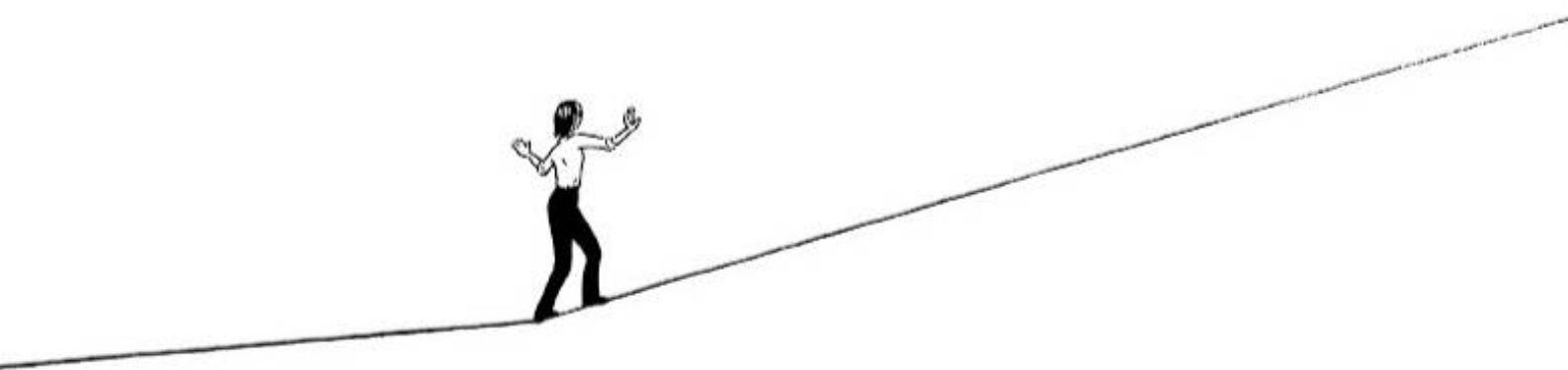
In the end, that's kind of what happened. I wrote the book and read it, rewrote it and read it, and drew it and read it...

...and I finally found my way out of the German forest by following the path carved out before me by all the great radio artists I interviewed.

It's a path that all of us can use to create the stories we want to tell...and that everyone else can't wait to hear.







# Notes

Except where noted below, quotes come from interviews I conducted or events I attended myself between February 2012 and June 2014. As will probably be obvious, locations for these interviews are often not as I depict them in this book—i.e., many interviews were over Skype, but I might show myself sitting in the same room with the person. Ira wore a snappy black suit on only one of the occasions we spoke, and that was just because some documentary film crew was in the office that day. Sometimes I depict someone in a historical “reenactment” or some other dramatization of what they’re talking about. I had short hair in the summer of 2012, when I did many of these interviews. I take this artistic license for your sake, dear reader. Reading a comic that consists of people’s faces on a Skype screen? Bo-ring.

About page numbers in the notes that follow: when you see something like this: 122:4, the first number is the page number and the number after the colon is the panel number. In other words, “page 24, panel 6” would read as 24:6.

## PREFACE

- 1:1** *L’Atelier du son*, Thomas Baumgartner.  
<http://www.franceculture.fr/emission-l-atelier-du-son>  
This interview really did happen, but it was quite a bit longer. *L’Atelier du son*, May 7, 2013.  
<http://www.franceculture.fr/emission-l-atelier-du-son-tomas-gubitsch-%20-jessica-abel-2013-04-19>  
Radio France building referenced from a drawing by Stanislas in *Le Perroquet des Batignolles* vol. 1 (Paris, Dargaud, 2011).
- 2:3** In my studio at the Maison des Auteurs. I’ve been in residence here, as of this writing, for two years. It’s a residency program for cartoonists and animators in Angoulême, France, and it’s the reason I’ve been able to produce this book. My deep gratitude goes to the MdA, Pili Muñoz, and Brigitte Macias.  
<http://www.citebd.org/spip.php?article5209>
- 4:1** Roman Mars and Sam Greenspan
- 4:2** Jad Abumrad
- 4:3** *Planet Money* made a T-shirt, and tracked the process from cotton seed to finished T-shirt. They funded this reporting with a wildly successful Kickstarter campaign.  
<http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/planetmoney/planet-money-t-shirt>

Along with making radio and podcasts about it, they documented the process on Tumblr shown here.

<http://seedtoshirt.tumblr.com/>

4:4 Julia DeWitt

4:6 *Snap Judgment* at an edit

4:5 Radiotopia is a new collective of many of the best independent podcast producers, masterminded by Roman Mars of 99% *Invisible* (see the Show Guide, page 223), and run by independent network PRX (<http://www.prx.org/>). Their first Kickstarter campaign, from which this screenshot was taken a week before it ended, was extremely successful, allowing them to invite three new podcasts to join their group, among other goals.

<http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1748303376/radiotopia-a-storytelling-revolution?ref=discovery>

5:1 Sean Cole

5:5 Spices restaurant, 369 12th Street, Oakland, California. Snap treated me and the staff to the famous “Gangsta Casserole ‘Murder Style.’”

<http://www.spices3oakland.com>

I also ate amazing dim sum and delicious Afghan food on the Snap dollar. It made it very difficult to concentrate on writing this book while I was transcribing that tape.

6:3 Justin Green, the author of *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*, at the Comics: Philosophy and Practice Conference at the University of Chicago said, “The dirty little secret of comics writing is copy fitting. Maybe you need an arm holding a broken bottle in that space, so you axe an adverb.”

6:5 Yes, you can still get *Radio: An Illustrated Guide*, for like five dollars. A big hunk of it follows, but there are about six pages of material in there that did not make it into this book.

<http://store.thisamericanlife.org/ProductDetails.asp?ProductCode=RADIO%3AANILLUSTRATEDGUIDE>

7 And then 12 hours later . . .

Matt Madden, *99 Ways to Tell a Story: Exercises in Style* (New York: Chamberlain Bros., 2005).

8:5 The “journalistic comic” is called “Punk Pilgrimage,” and ran in *NewCity* in 1995. Ira called me to propose doing *Radio: An Illustrated Guide* in 1998. I’ve posted the comic that inspired Ira to call me on my site.

<http://jessicaabel.com/2014/12/03/punk-pilgrimage-fireside-bowl/>

8:6 There are lots of researched nonfiction comics out there, lots more than there used to be. But it remains an underutilized form.

10:3 Those two textbooks:

Jessica Abel and Matt Madden, *Drawing Words & Writing Pictures* (New York: First Second Books, 2008).



Jessica Abel and Matt Madden, *Mastering Comics* (New York: First Second Books, 2012).

- 13-38 Excerpt from Jessica Abel and Ira Glass, *Radio: An Illustrated Guide* (Chicago: WBEZ Alliance, Inc., and Artbabe Army Publishing, 1999). The radio episode under consideration in this section is "Do-Gooders," *This American Life*, #126, April 9, 1999.  
<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/126/do-gooders>
- 19 You can find an archive of stories like this one at Brett Leveridge's website: [www.brettnews.com](http://www.brettnews.com). He also writes at [Salon.com](http://Salon.com), among other places.
- 22 Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).
- 39-41 Just to make sure this is perfectly clear: The people pictured in pages 39-41 are those that I've interviewed or mentioned by name in this book. They are not **by any means** all who are involved in producing the shows I name there. They're also not all still at the same shows since I interviewed them. Please see Show Guide, page 222, for further details.

#### AMUSE YOURSELF: IDEAS

- 48:4 Ira Glass commencement address to the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism, December 13, 2012.  
<http://vimeo.com/55563744>
- 49:1 Alex Blumberg, Adam Davidson, Ira Glass, "The Giant Pool of Money," *This American Life*, #355, May 9, 2008.  
<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/355/the-giant-pool-of-money>  
Thanks to Clarence Nathan for pictures of himself. He reports, "I eventually lost the property through short sale and have relocated to Durham, NC."  
He also said, "I thought about that statement and it was one of my more colorful ones. I feel it served the moment almost perfectly."
- 49:4 Calculated Risk.  
<http://www.calculatedriskblog.com>
- 49:5-6 Background referenced from a photo by Shawn Hoke.
- 50:5 Referenced from a photo by Seth Wenig/AP Photo.
- 50:8 Background referenced from a photo by Flickr user mlouispink.
- 52:3 Tod Maffin, *From Idea to Air* (self-published ebook, <http://todmaffin.com/shop/ideatoair>).
- 53:1 The story the Workshop had under discussion was Jessica Kittams's "About One Acre." There used to be lots of funny quotes from the class about oxen and Mar-

tha's Vineyard in an earlier draft of this book, which was about eight times as long. Argh, comics.

<http://transom.org/workshop/story-workshop/story-workshop-alumni/jessica-kittams-about-one-acre/>

**56–59** The idea of the XY Story Formula is delineated in Alex Blumberg's 2006 Transom manifesto. His lines on these pages are direct quotes from there.

Alex Blumberg, "Alex Blumberg's Manifesto," *The Transom Review*, volume 5/issue 2, September 1, 2005.

<http://transom.org/?p=7003>

**57** David Kestenbaum picked up on Alex's formula and talked about it in the online comments in response to his own *Transom* article, quoted here.

David Kestenbaum, "The 4:30 FAQ," *The Transom Review*, volume 6/issue 2, April 24, 2006.

<http://transom.org/2006/david-kestenbaum-430-faq-2/>

**57:3** David Kestenbaum, "E-Mail Encryption Rare in Everyday Use," NPR News, February 22, 2006.

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5227744>

**59:3** Referenced from a photo found on Fotosearch.

**59:4** Referenced from a photo by lewkmiller.

**62** Robert Smith, "Does New York City Need More Taxis?" *Planet Money*, July 31, 2012.

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/money/2012/07/31/157477611/does-new-york-city-need-more-taxis>

**63–64** This is a re-creation of Ira's discussion with Mike Shuster, based on Ira's recollection (and historical photos from NPR—thanks, Emerson Brown!).

**65** "What Kind of Country," *This American Life*, #459, March 2, 2012.

<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/459/what-kind-of-country>

**65:2** Referenced from a photo by Alamy.

**66:4–6, 67:1** Although the majority of Jay's dialogue is from my interview with him, these panels are quotes from a comment he made on Alex Blumberg's Transom manifesto (see note to pages 56–59), May 15, 2005, comment #30. The "interviewees" in 68:3 are fictional.

**67:4, 68:1** Ira is talking about "129 Cars," *This American Life*, #513, December 13, 2013.

<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/513/129-cars>

**67:3** Referenced from a photo by Paul Sancya / AP.

**67:4 (AND 68:1)** Referenced from a photo by Jeff Minton.

**69** Alex Blumberg was not in the room when I interviewed Chana, and to my knowledge has no interest in enforcing his XY rubric. It was just funnier if he said it than if I did.

- 70-72** "Trends with Benefits," *This American Life*, #490, March 22, 2013.  
<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/490/trends-with-benefits?act=1>  
 Also see Chana Joffe-Walt's related article "Unfit for Work: The Startling Rise of Disability in America."  
<http://apps.npr.org/unfit-for-work/>
- 70:1** Referenced from a photo by Matthew Christopher Murray.
- 71:2-4** These are direct quotes from the story.
- 73-74** Reader, she married him. Thanks to Cynthia for photos of the cryptogrammic mash notes, her postmistress, and herself and Howie at their wedding. 73:3, 5, 6, and 74:1, 3, 4, 6 are direct quotes from the story.  
 Cynthia Riggs, "The Case of the Curious Codes," *The Moth*. Directed by Sarah Austin Jenness. Recorded at a Moth Mainstage event at Union Chapel in Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard, August 13, 2012. Appeared first on *The Moth Radio Hour* on February 5, 2013, and then on *The Moth Podcast* on July 16, 2013.  
<http://themoth.org/posts/storytellers/cynthia-riggs>  
 This story was also reprinted in *The Moth: 50 True Stories*, Catherine Burns, editor (New York: Hyperion, 2013), 252-57.
- 75-76** "What's Up, Doc?" with Sean Cole, *Radiolab*, November 6, 2012.  
<http://www.radiolab.org/story/248590-blanc/>

#### THE HEAT OF THEIR BREATH: CHARACTER AND VOICE

- 79:1** I picture my self backstage at a simplified version of The Players in New York, where The Moth holds many of its Mainstage events. I have never been backstage at The Players, nor front-stage, for that matter.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Players\\_\(New\\_York\\_City\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Players_(New_York_City))
- 80:4** Referenced from a photo by Rebecca Davis.
- 83-84** Jad plays a YouTube video that is an adaptation of a 2012 presidential campaign speech by Ron Paul, read by an actor and with flashy graphics. Images at 83:6 and 84:1 are from this adaptation:  
 "Imagine," posted by WRB Ministries.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uhxBM8ebEC0>
- 85:3,4** Referenced from a photo taken by Melikhaya Mpumela.  
 Joe is obliquely referring to his work in South Africa; in particular, "Thembi's AIDS Diary." The image is of Thembi Ngubane, who died in 2009.  
 Thembi Ngubane and Joe Richman, "Thembi's AIDS Diary," *Radio Diaries*, 2006.  
<http://www.radiodiaries.org/thembis-aids-diary/>  
 More information about this story appears on Thembi's AIDS Diary website:  
<http://www.aidsdiary.org/>
- 87:1-2** Alex Blumberg's quote is from a comment on his Transom manifesto. See note to pages 56, 58, 59.



- 88:4** Jad is referring to “Speed” (“Million Dollar Microsecond,” with David Kestenbaum), *Radiolab*, February 5, 2013.  
<http://www.radiolab.org/story/267195-million-dollar-microsecond/>
- 89:2** Johann Kraus © Mike Mignola. It’s “ectoplasm” actually, not smoke. I’ve used the film version of the character, not the comics one, since Jad talks about the film.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann\\_Kraus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann_Kraus)
- 90:5–92:3** These are quotes from a talk that Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich gave at Oberlin College on March 6, 2008, which they recorded and distributed as a *Radiolab* podcast. They spoke in Finney Chapel.  
 Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich, “Jad and Robert: The Early Years,” *Radiolab*, May 6, 2008.  
<http://www.radiolab.org/story/91820-jad-and-robert-the-early-years/>
- 91:3** Referenced from a photo by Zenith Richards.
- 92:3–94** These are quotes from a talk Jad gave at the Third Coast International Audio Festival in 2005.  
 Jad Abumrad, “Music: A Force for Good (and Sometimes Evil).”  
<http://www.thirdcoastfestival.org/library/450-music-a-force-for-good-and-sometimes-evil>  
 Photo reference for Jad in this sequence by the Third Coast International Audio Festival and Jared and Corin, Wikimedia Commons.
- 92–94** The story Jad discusses is from “There Is No Lord of the (Fire)Flies,” *Radiolab*, February 18, 2005.  
<http://www.radiolab.org/story/91501-there-is-no-lord-of-the-fireflies/>
- 93:4–5** Referenced from a photo by Chi Phat Ecotourism Adventures.
- 95:4** Robert and Zoe are referring to a series of stories they did in Europe, including a story on Barilla Pasta (that’s what’s pictured in panel 3, referenced from a photo by Barilla Pasta).  
 Robert Smith and Zoe Chace, “How a Pasta Factory Got People to Show Up for Work,” *Planet Money*, August 10, 2012.  
<http://www.npr.org/blogs/money/2012/08/10/158565443/how-a-pasta-factory-got-people-to-show-up-for-work>
- 96:1–97:3** “Razzle Dazzle”; producer: Jamie DeWolf; sound design: Renzo Gorrio, *Snap Judgment*, #316, July 13, 2012.  
<http://snapjudgment.org/circus-circus>
- 98:3–100** “Rocky,” by Julia DeWitt, *Snap Judgment*, #316, July 13, 2012.  
<http://snapjudgment.org/circus-circus>
- 101:5** Referenced from a film still of Kenneth Branagh as Hamlet.
- 103:4** This quote is from Roman Mars, “The Feltron Annual Report,” *99% Invisible*, #31, July 14, 2011.

<http://99percentinvisible.org/episode/episode-31-the-feltron-annual-report/>

**104:1** A quick visual quote from the excellent book: Brooke Gladstone and Josh Neufeld, *The Influencing Machine: Brooke Gladstone on the Media* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011).

**106** The Kitchen Sisters: Nikki Silva and Davia Nelson.

I actually met Nikki and her family at Jay Allison's house on almost the first day I was reporting this book. I was so nervous to get started, and had so little idea what I was doing, that I didn't even try to interview her. Totally whiffed that one.

<http://www.kitchensisters.org/>

**106:1** Referenced from a photo by Weluvradio, Wikimedia Commons.

#### KEEP OR KILL: STORY STRUCTURE

**110–11** Faye Lane, "Fireworks from Above," *The Moth*. Recorded at a Moth Main-stage event at Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall in Portland, Oregon, February 17, 2011. Directed by Catherine Burns. Appeared first on *The Moth Radio Hour* on November 18, 2012, and was on *The Moth Podcast* on February 4, 2013. 110:1, 3, 4, and 111:2–5 are direct quotes from the story.

<http://themoth.org/posts/stories/fireworks-from-above>

This story was also reprinted in *The Moth: 50 True Stories*, Catherine Burns, editor (New York: Hyperion, 2013), 385–91.

**112:4** This refers to the writing section in *Radio: An Illustrated Guide* on page 29.

**115–16** Joe Richman, Sue Johnson, and Samara Freemark, "Teen Contender," *Radio Diaries*, 2012.

<http://www.radiodiaries.org/teen-contender/>

**115:2, 3, 5 AND 112:1** Referenced from photos by Ryan Garza.

**115:4** Referenced from a photo by Sue Jaye Johnson.

**117–18** The story under discussion is Lauren Ober's "Hunger Pains," *Transom Story Workshop*. 117:3 and 118:2, 3, 5 contain direct quotes from this story.

<http://transom.org/workshop/story-workshop/story-workshop-alumni/lauren-ober-hunger-pains/>

Thanks to Lauren for the use of her photos from reporting the story.

**119:2** Referenced from a photo by Mel Evans, AP.

**119:4–6** David Kestenbaum and Jacob Goldstein, "The Friday Podcast: Gold!" *Planet Money*, October 15, 2010. 119:4, 5 contain direct quotes from this story.

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/money/2011/02/07/130597201/the-friday-podcast-gold>

**119:5** Referenced from an image by Peter Foley, Bloomberg, Getty Images.

- 120:1,2** Caitlin Kenney, "Keeping the Biggest Secret in the U.S. Economy," *Planet Money*, August 3, 2012.  
<http://www.npr.org/blogs/money/2012/08/03/157859194/keeping-the-biggest-secret-in-the-u-s-economy>
- 120:5** United States Department of the Army, Psychological Operations (Department of Defense: Department of the Army, Headquarters, 1979).  
<http://books.google.com/books?id=O3rN-FbANzcC&dq>
- 122:1-3** These are quotes from Jad Abumrad, "Radio That's Close to Filmmaking," CNN's *The Next List*, May 9, 2012.  
<http://whatsnext.blogs.cnn.com/2012/05/09/jad-abumrad-radio-thats-close-to-filmmaking/>
- 122:5-7 AND 123:1, 2, 5-7** Quotes (visually and verbally) from David Fine, director, "American Hipster Presents" *Radiolab*, #50, March 18, 2013.  
<http://americanhipsterpresents.com/#radiolab>  
 The story Jad, Robert, and Soren are working on is "Inheritance," *Radiolab*, season 11, episode 2.  
<http://www.radiolab.org/story/251876-inheritance/>
- 126** Sean is talking about his story, with Roman Mars, "Some Other Sign that People Do Not Totally Regret Life," *99% Invisible*, #59, July 25, 2012.  
<http://99percentinvisible.org/episode/episode-59-some-other-sign-that-people-do-not-totally/>  
 Read the plaque, people!
- 126:7-127** Andy Christie, "The Ghost of Christmas Presents," *The Moth*. Andy told the version of the story that Catherine is referring to at a StorySLAM at the Bitter End with the theme "Gifts" on 12/29/2008. Later, a revised version was recorded at a Moth Mainstage show in New York City at The Players on April 15, 2010. It has not appeared on the radio hour but was on *The Moth Podcast* on December 24, 2013.  
<http://themoth.org/posts/stories/the-ghost-of-christmas-presents>
- 127:2** Referenced from a photo by Erik Neumann and Carly Nairn.
- 127:4** Referenced from a photo by Librado Romero, *New York Times*.
- 127:6** Gustave Doré, illustration, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, Canto 21.
- 128:2** Referenced from a photo by Jikesh Kannan.
- 134:3-5** This is a quote from a comment Robert Krulwich made on his own Transom manifesto.  
 Robert Krulwich, "WHY I LOVE RADIO (and TV)," *The Transom Review*, volume 2/issue 9, November 1, 2002. Comment by Robert Krulwich: "Blocks, Triangles and the Mystery of Improvisation," #48, September 23, 2002.  
<http://transom.org/2002/robert-krulwich-why-love-radio/>



- 134:4** The Talk of the Town interview with Martin Scorsese is in the November 27, 1995, issue of *The New Yorker*.
- 135:1** Referenced from a photo by Cristina Potters.
- 136–137** I take a scary walk with Zoe Chace and Robert Smith on these two pages.
- 138** Jay Allison is getting lost in the woods on this page.
- 139, 143** These are quotes from Jad Abumrad's 2012 keynote speech at the Third Coast International Audio Festival.  
 Jad Abumrad, "These Are a Few of My Favorite Things," October 7, 2012.  
<http://www.thirdcoastfestival.org/library/1227-these-are-a-few-of-my-favorite-things>  
 The Wagner story he references is Jad Abumrad, "The Ring and I: The Passion, the Myth, the Mania," WNYC, March 2004.  
<http://www.wnyc.org/story/71011-the-ring-and-i-the-passion-the-myth-the-mania/>
- 142** I stand on the cliff with Jad Abumrad and Kierkegaard, and then I base-jump with Jacob Goldstein of *Planet Money*.  
 Jad is referring to Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*.
- 143** Jad leads me out of the woods.
- 139:1** Referenced from a photo by Kate Joyce Studios.
- 142:1 AND 3** These are quotes from Jad Abumrad's speech at the 2011 PRPD Conference (Public Radio Program Directors' Association). The audio can be found here:  
[http://www.prpd.org/conference/conference\\_past/2011\\_confaudiogen.aspx](http://www.prpd.org/conference/conference_past/2011_confaudiogen.aspx).  
 Jad also wrote a version of the speech as a Transom Manifesto, "The Terrors & Occasional Virtues of Not Knowing What You're Doing," July 26, 2012.  
<http://transom.org/2012/jad-abumrad-terrors-and-virtues/>
- 143:3** Referenced from a painting by Ivan Shishkin.

#### THE DEEP SEA: SOUND

Throughout this chapter, I'm quoting lines from "Night at the Rock Bar," producer: Mark Ristich; sound design: Pat Mesiti-Miller *Snap Judgment*, #230, December 7, 2011.

<http://snapjudgment.org/night-rock-bar>

<http://snapjudgment.org/fight-of-your-life>

The songs Pat used in this story are:

"Statistica" (statistics) by Hadag Nahash

Album: *Hadag Nahash* on Hed Arzi Music

"Tubthumping" by Chumbawamba

Album: *Tubthumper* on Universal Records

- "Equator" by Zero Cult  
Album: *Vacuum* on Cosmiclead Records
- "Grass" by Animal Collective  
Album: *Grass* on FatCat Records
- "The Product" (Instrumental) by Freeway & Jake One  
Album: *The Stimulus Package* on Rhymesayers Entertainment
- 149:4** Referenced from a photo by Thomas Prouteau and Polina Fomina.
- 154:4** Referenced from a photo by Delbridge Langdon Jr.
- 155-58** "Out of Body, Roger," by Ann Heppermann and Kara Oehler, *Radiolab*, season 2, episode 4.  
<http://www.radiolab.org/story/91527-out-of-body-roger/>  
Images of the centrifuge at the Johnsville Naval Air Development Center (NADC) referenced from archival photos of NASA tests. Thanks to Timothy Sestak for helping me track these down. And thanks to Ann Heppermann for helping me get in touch with Timothy Sestak.
- 164:5** I like a man who casually tosses multiple references to comic books into his interviews.

#### YOUR BABY'S UGLY: THE EDIT

- 169-70** Chana's first story for *Planet Money* was, in fact, supposed to be the first *Planet Money* story ever. Which explains why there were so, so many people on the phone. Everyone was excited about this cool new project. As it happened, however, the global economy fell apart three days before the piece was supposed to go live on September 8, 2008, so, you know, they pushed it back until that November.  
Chana Joffe-Walt, "How 6 Parts Nearly Delayed World's Biggest Airliner," *Planet Money*, November 1, 2008.  
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=96378999>
- 173:3** For a complete rundown of all the pieces on "Coming to America," see the Show Guide on page 222.  
"Gas Tank Crossing"; producer: Stephanie Foo; sound design: Pat Mesiti-Miller, *Snap Judgment*, #315, June 29, 2012.  
<http://snapjudgment.org/gas-tank-crossing>
- 173:4** Stephanie Foo and Mark Ristich, "Learning to Speak," *Snap Judgment*, #315, June 29, 2012.  
<http://snapjudgment.org/learning-speak>
- 173:5-179** Stephanie Foo, "Texas vs. Texas," *Snap Judgment*, #315, June 29, 2012.  
<http://snapjudgment.org/texas-vs-texas>  
Thanks to Stephanie for sending me her photos from her interview with Joe Rowe.

The panels that run down the center of these pages are direct quotes from the rough cut of the story (this is not the version that ran on the air). Stephanie played the story first (as shown in 173:5) and then the group discussed it. The discussion is shown alongside quotes from the story for clarity, but in reality, they are using notes and their memory of the story to discuss it, and occasionally replaying short clips.

- 187** Jad and Soren are referring to the same story we saw them working on in Chapter 3, pages 122–23: “Inheritance,” *Radiolab*, season 11, episode 2.  
<http://www.radiolab.org/story/251876-inheritance/>

**188:5–6, 190:2–4** “Learning to Speak.” See note to 173:4.

**191:5–6, 192, 193** “Gas Tank Crossing.” See note to 173:3.



## Show Guide

### **99% INVISIBLE** <http://99percentinvisible.org/>

*99% Invisible* is a weekly podcast about design. At least, now it's weekly. When I spoke to Roman Mars, in July 2012, it was just before his first Kickstarter campaign, when he started ramping up staffing and frequency. At the time, he worked alone, with the long-distance assistance of one part-time staffer, Sam Greenspan. Since that time, Roman has become justifiably famous for his success in building an intensely loyal and generous fan base, and connecting to them directly for financial support. In his interview, Sean Cole talked about several stories he's made for the show, where he is a regular contributor.

Roman was also one of the earliest staff members of *Snap Judgment*, hired to help Mark and Glynn learn the essentials of tailoring their audio style to what was required for a radio show (like where breaks should fall, making sure vocals were clear, and so on). That's why he's in here talking about *Snap*. *99% Invisible* and *Radio Diaries* are founding members of a new narrative podcast collective called Radiotopia. (<http://www.radiotopia.fm/>)

### **THE MOTH** <http://themoth.org/>

The Moth is, at its heart, a live storytelling event (or collection of events). Founded by George Dawes Green in New York City in 1997, it now runs events all over the country, as well as doing a weekly radio show and a podcast.

The Mainstage is the "flagship" event, where directors solicit stories from tellers and then direct them intensively. This is primarily what Catherine Burns was talking about in our interview. She also refers to a "StorySLAM," in which storytellers work up their own stories and compete to win the accolades of the crowd. Stories from both the Mainstage and the StorySLAMs can make it onto the radio show and the podcast. For the radio, they are edited (extremely minimally) by Jay Allison, who is the radio producer for *The Moth Radio Hour*, and are introduced by Jay and the directors.

I spoke to Jay Allison in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, in April 2012. I spoke to Catherine Burns in September 2013, and I visited the Moth office in February 2014. Jenna Weiss-Berman (she of the Transom Workshop), showed me around and helped me with follow-up questions. The rest of The Moth's directorial staff includes Sarah Haberman, Sarah Austin Jenness, Jenifer Hixson, Meg Bowles,

Kate Tellers, Maggie Cino, and Inga Glodowski; with support from Kirsty Bennett, Whitney Jones, and Jenelle Pifer.

**PLANET MONEY** <http://npr.org/money/>

*Planet Money* is a podcast and radio program about money and the economy. Its creators are Adam Davidson and Alex Blumberg (the latter of whom was then also a staff member at *This American Life* but has now departed both *TAL* and *Planet Money* to start a new podcast company, called Gimlet Media).

I visited *Planet Money* in the summer of 2012, on July 25–26, and August 2 and 8, and followed up with several Skype calls. At the time, they produced two podcasts, and two or three segments for *All Things Considered* and *Morning Edition* a week, as well as blog content, and four hours a year for *This American Life*.

The main story I followed through the process was about offshore finance, by Chana Joffe-Walt, but in the end, that one didn't make it in. The other stories I reference are all noted as they come up.

The reporting staff when I visited consisted of:

Alex Blumberg  
Zoe Chace  
Adam Davidson  
Jacob Goldstein (reporter and blogger)  
Chana Joffe-Walt  
David Kestenbaum  
Robert Smith

And the rest of the staff:

Caitlin Kenney (producer)  
Jess Jiang (producer)  
Lam Thuy Vo (graphics and design for the website)

I divide it up like that because, officially, those are (were) their jobs. But one of the characteristics of this kind of radio is a DIY, follow-your-interests focus, and that means that basically everybody produces and basically everybody reports and is on the air.

**RADIO DIARIES** <http://www.radiodiaries.org/podcast>

*Radio Diaries* is also growing, thanks to a very successful Kickstarter campaign, and has moved into quarters down the hall from *This American Life*. When I interviewed Joe Richman, in June 2012, he was still working (with part-time assistance) out of his former apartment, a classic Lower East Side tenement, complete with bathtub in the kitchen. That was cool.

*Radio Diaries* grows out of the idea of giving ordinary people tape recorders and getting them to record their lives, which Joe and his staff then edit intensively into non-narrated pieces that run on *All Things Considered* (and are podcast). But they also do non-narrated histories using interviews and historical tape, and have even done a few narrated pieces, including for *This American Life*. They have begun producing more stories in more different varieties than

ever, which you can find on their podcast. They are also founding members of the podcast collective Radiotopia, with 99% *Invisible*.

**RADIOLAB** <http://www.radiolab.org/>

*Radiolab* is a radio show about ideas, often scientific ideas, that uses experimental techniques and avant-garde sound to illuminate complex subjects. I visited *Radiolab* in February 2012. Sean Cole was on staff at that time, though he'd left shortly before I interviewed him in May 2013. I interviewed Jad Abumrad in November 2013 and June 2014, and senior producer Soren Wheeler and executive producer Ellen Horne in November 2013.

**SNAP JUDGMENT** <http://snapjudgment.org/>

*Snap Judgment* is a themed weekly radio show that focuses on propulsive first-person storytelling, intensively edited and soundtracked. I visited *Snap Judgment* June 11–14, 2012, and had many Skype follow-ups in the subsequent three weeks. While I was following them, they were producing two episodes in a three-week period, listed below with all the individual stories on those shows.

The staff in June 2012 was as follows:

*Host and executive producer*

Glynn Washington

*Executive producer*

Mark Ristich

*Senior producer*

Anna Sussman

*Producers*

Stephanie Foo

Jamie DeWolf

Renzo Gorrio

Pat Mesiti-Miller (who is also “music editor”)

*Webmaster, video producer, and graphics designer*

Will Urbina

*“Assistant producer” (i.e., intern)*

Julia DeWitt (she is now a full producer on the show)

“Coming to America”—*Snap Judgment*, #315, June 29, 2012

<http://snapjudgment.org/Coming-to-america>

“Pen Pals,” producer: Stephanie Foo; sound design: Renzo Gorrio

“Gas Tank Crossing,” producer: Stephanie Foo; sound design: Pat Mesiti-Miller

“Texas vs. Texas,” producer: Stephanie Foo

“International Gaydar,” producers: Pat Mesiti-Miller and Anna Sussman

“Learning to Speak,” producers: Stephanie Foo and Mark Ristich



"Circus, Circus"—*Snap Judgment*, #316, July 13, 2012

<http://snapjudgment.org/circus-circus>

"Real Boy," producer: Glynn Washington; sound design: Pat Mesiti-Miller

"Circus Soviet," producer: Anna Sussman

"Razzle Dazzle," producer: Jamie DeWolf; sound design: Renzo Gorrio

"Rocky," producer: Julia DeWitt

"Big Mary," producers: Glynn Washington and Anna Sussman

"No Talent Circus—Chicken John," producer: Jamie DeWolf; sound design: Mark Ristich

I also focus on "Night at the Rock Bar," producer: Mark Ristich; sound design: Pat Mesiti-Miller, which appeared on a different episode, "Fight of Your Life," *Snap Judgment*, #230.

As a side note, for random reasons the two *Snap* stories I spend the most time on involve guns and violence. This isn't reflective of the majority of *Snap* stories, which cover the gamut of human experience. Just needed to put that out there.

**THIS AMERICAN LIFE** <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/>

More information about participants in and dates for *Radio: An Illustrated Guide* can be found in the preface, on page 13. That book was published in September of 1999 as a pledge-drive premium, and has been in print ever since, available primarily via *This American Life's* website: <http://store.thisamericanlife.org/ProductDetails.asp?ProductCode=RADIO%3AANILLUSTRATEDGUIDE>

I did follow-up interviews with Ira Glass in November 2013. Since I completed my research for this book, *TAL* has hired up some of the great producers you'll see here from other shows: Chana Joffe-Walt, Sean Cole, Stephanie Foo, and Zoe Chace all now work at *This American Life*. On the other hand, Alex Blumberg has now left *TAL* and also *Planet Money*, to begin his own podcast company, Gimlet Media. His first podcast, the story of his company, is called *Startup*. *TAL* has also started a new podcast which reports a single story serialized over many weeks, called *Serial*. As I write this, in December 2014, the whole podcast sector is growing and changing so rapidly it feels foolish to even try to catalogue the changes, but I call that a good problem to have.

In April 1999 (when *Radio: An Illustrated Guide* was written), *This American Life* was produced by Ira Glass, Julie Snyder, Alix Spiegel, and Nancy Updike, with help from Todd Bachmann, Jorge Just, Sylvia Lemus, and webmaster Elizabeth Meister.

**TRANSOM STORY WORKSHOP** <http://transom.org/workshop/>

I visited the Transom Workshop on April 7–9, 2012.

Reading my sections on the workshop, you'd think instructor Rob Rosenthal is the kind of teacher who holds forth at length while students listen and take notes. Nothing could be further from the truth. The most remarkable aspect of the class was Rob's teaching method, which involves a lot of listening to stu-

dents, and not a lot of talking. But because of the brutal editing required by comics, I wasn't able to depict this interplay.

You can listen to all the pieces from that spring's Transom Workshop here: <http://transom.org/2012/story-workshop-pieces-spring-2012-2/>

Rob Rosenthal produces a really great podcast series that goes behind the scenes with radio makers and analyzes their best work, called *HowSound* (<http://howsound.org/>).

There were nine participants in the Spring 2012 workshop, but only four were in the class I attended:

Lauren Ober (<http://www.oberandout.com/>)

Jessica Kittams (<http://transom.org/workshop/story-workshop/story-workshop-alumni/jessica-kittams-about-one-acre/>)

Jenna Weiss-Berman, who afterward worked at The Moth, was incredibly helpful to me in getting reference and filling in the information I needed about Moth stories. (<http://transom.org/workshop/story-workshop/story-workshop-alumni/jenna-weiss-berman-knock-out/>)

Andrew Norton (<http://www.andrewnorton.tv>) has produced a really wonderful series of short documentary videos (<http://www.thisisradio.com/>) featuring many of the producers who are in this book, and from which I cribbed for photo reference.

#### **FURTHER RESOURCES**

If you're interested in making radio yourself, you can find huge amounts of great information on Transom.org, about everything from how to mic an interview to how to write narration, to how to set up a home studio. It's an amazing resource. I learned a ton and I've never even tried to make radio.

<http://transom.org/>

Another very comprehensive site devoted to narrative journalism (and not only on the radio) is Nieman Storyboard.

<http://www.niemanstoryboard.org/>

*This American Life* also maintains a wrap-up of radio-making resources.

<http://www.thisamericanlife.org/about/make-radio>